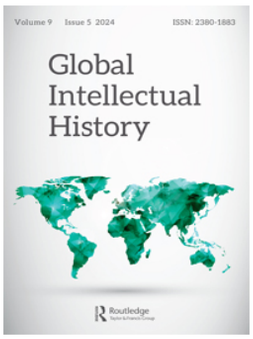

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Safavid Twelver Lettrism Between Sunnism and Shiʿism, Mysticism and Science: Rajab al-Bursī *vs.* Maḥmūd Dihdār

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ABSTRACT

This comparative case study takes up the examples of two Twelver lettrists, who together became two of the most important occultist authorities of the high Safavid period: al-Ḥāfiẓ Rajab al-Bursī (d. after 1410) and Maḥmūd Dihdār Shīrāzī (fl. 1576). Their projects are intimately connected, and can only be historiographically explained in tandem. Yet the first has been celebrated in the literature as a passionate, semi-extremist Twelver mystic, and the second—a sober, experimentalist Twelver occult scientist—totally elided. Nor has any study to date identified both authors' primary point of scholarly reference: the New Brethren of Purity network of imperial Timurid and Ottoman Pythagoreanizing occultists radiating from late Mamluk Cairo, capital of the lettrist renaissance to which they were consciously heir. To correct such elisions and imbalances, we must forswear the persistent scientistic-*cum*-religionist dogma that vanishes lettrism and other mainstream occult sciences into the wastebasket, apolitical category that is 'mysticism,' thus exiling much of Safavid intellection from early modern history of philosophy, of science and of empire. For al-Bursī, taking a page from his contemporaries the New Brethren, is the first Shiʿi author to draw directly on Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240) and Aḥmad al-Būnī (d. btw. 1225–33) both, the two foremost Sunni lettrists of the later Islamicate scholarly tradition, representing lettrist theory and lettrist praxis respectively; and Dihdār—the most prolific Persian author on practical Būnian lettrism of the sixteenth century, and hence immediate inspiration for the al-Bursī cult of the next—provides us an invaluable window onto how Safavid philosophy was actually imperially, occult-scientifically practiced, as well as the evolution of the Western grimoire tradition as a whole.

KEYWORDS

Safavid Iran; history of philosophy and science; occult sciences; lettrism and Pythagoreanism; Twelver Sunnism; New Brethren of Purity; science-religion-magic

The Science-Religion wars that bloodily birthed Euro-American modernity, and since constantly rehearsed, have long cast a pall of disenchantment over all of Western intellectual history. Yet that modern pall is equally an enchantment.[1] And no subset of Western intellectual history remains more enchanted thereby than the Islamicate, where Stephen Jay Gould's doctrine of 'non-overlapping magisteria' – rejected as painfully, absurdly oversimplistic and patronizing by many Europeanists and working

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scientists and theologians alike – enjoys the full force of orthodoxy.[2] We Islamicists, most of us without meaning to, persist in divorcing spirit from body, excising mind from matter, in reflexively materialist fashion. So ensorcelled, we backproject the twentieth-century scientism-religionism détente that neatly if gruesomely cleaves the history of Western intellection down the spine and vivisects separately its moieties: science vs. religion, reason vs. tradition, west vs. east.[3] But Magic blurs – indeed explodes – such colonialist, epistemicidal boundaries.

For Magic, in its many high Western iterations, marries Science and Religion, theory and praxis, mind and matter, heaven and earth, God and empire. Historically, it also marries Islamdom and Christendom.[4] Yet such alchemical marriages were rather more definitive of the premodern Islamicate context than the Christianate: unlike in Latin, the occult sciences (*ʿulūm gharība*) feature in most Arabo-Persian classifications of the sciences precisely as the only branches of human knowledge to bridge the otherwise strict generic and epistemic divide between the rational (*ʿaqlī*), or Hellenic, and the religious (*dīnī*) and traditional (*naqlī*), or Islamic, sciences. As a consequence, Islamicate natural-mathematical science was often at least half explicitly occult;[5] and much of that half was progressively and permanently sanctified, and then imperialized, in a manner unparalleled by its Christianate cognate.[6] The latter, if anything, suffered gradual desanctification, at least ostensibly – whence the Victorian vivisectionist *science-religion-magic* evolutionary triad, violently colonialist and racist and hence worse than useless for intellectual-historiographical purposes.[7]

Among the most piquant ironies of modernity, however, is the fact that modern Science – no less imperialist, and indeed more fully weaponized – has again been wreathed about with sacrality. It is also frequently *occult* (Ar. and Pers. *khafī*, Gr. *apókruphos*, Lat. *occultus*), an adjective that in standard premodern Western usage simply denotes those disciplines in which nonvisible data is extrapolated from visible, a procedure productive of both wonder and technological innovation.[8] That we moderns now use the premodern term exclusively as a slur on a par with 'spooky,' and prefer neologistic prefixes like 'dark,' 'sub-,' 'super-' or 'para-,' does not make largely occult sciences like psychology and astrophysics less technically epistemologically so.[9] Similarly, that we do not dub Google or the Utah Data Center what they so manifestly are, imperial Comprehensive Prognosticons (sg. *al-jafr al-jāmiʿ*), is a mere matter of terminological vogue. Behold the magical power of naming!

But if we undo such rupturous acts of colonialist name magic, yet another remarkable instance of intra-Western continuity reappears: a formally similar epistemological-sociological triad was constellated by many premodern Muslim thinkers too, just as bent on reclassifying all branches of knowledge and their practice as their contemporary Christian peers. In sharp contrast to the (anti-Christian) model of James Frazer (d. 1941), however, they explicitly embraced Magic not as primordial pseudoscience but as middle term between Science and Religion, or rather equally, fully and perennially both.

In the Islamicate context, moreover, the same category served to blur the boundaries between Sunnism and Shiʿism. From the thirteenth century CE onward, it is often impossible to discern the confessional affiliation of professional occult scientists on the basis of their writings, and emphatically Sunni works routinely became Shiʿi classics and Shiʿi works Sunni, especially during the early modern era of imperial confessionalization.[10] (This too is in sharp contrast to its rhetorical role in contemporary Latin Christendom, where Magic was often invoked to consolidate the great rupture of the

Reformation: reprising early Christian anti-pagan polemic, Protestant anti-Catholic polemic routinely featured the pat reduction of papism to sorcery, defined in classic Augustinian terms as intercourse with demons.[11]) For the progressive sanctification of the natural and mathematical occult sciences took place through their reconceptualization as *the* sciences of *walāya*, the 'sacral power' peculiar to the Shiʿi Imams and their saintly sayyid and then Sufi heirs in the centuries after.

To the extent that Islamicists—willy-nilly fitted with the straitjacket of modern racist-religionist nationalism—continue to be convinced by the confessionalizing rhetoric of our sources, then, Religion constitutes a major stumbling block in the study of Western intellectual history. The salient point of Islamicate philosophy-science (occult or otherwise) as an evolving universalist, Hellenic-Abrahamic dialectic is rarely its Sunniness or Shiʿiness, but rather its remarkable embrace of confessional and other types of ambiguity—indeed, even outright contradiction—to a degree unparalleled by its often more chauvinist Christianate twin.[12]

To help further the decolonization of Western intellectual history in general and Islamicate in particular, I offer as representative test case a comparative study of two of the most influential lettrists in the later Twelver Shiʿi tradition: al-Ḥāfiẓ Rajab al-Bursī (d. after 1410) and Maḥmūd Dihdār Shīrāzī (fl. 1576).[13] While examples could easily be multiplied, the writings of these two worthies provide an especially strategic aperture onto our problematic here: for they together served as important tools in the construction of the new Safavid Shiʿi imperial culture that came to define early modern Iran. The epochal Shiʿization of Iran cannot be understood without reference to both in tandem and equal measure, as the manuscript record makes abundantly clear. Yet the first has been celebrated in modern scholarship, and the second totally elided. (Specifically, al-Bursī's name recurs hundreds of times in the published scholarship of the last several decades, while Dihdār's is so vanishingly rare as to virtually not exist; my own forthcoming work and the present study aside, I know of only one article to date, in Persian, that engages him directly, and then only in a preliminary attempt to pin down the basic facts of his biography.[14]) Why such a wild imbalance in Safavid studies? Whence such blatant, blinkering partisanship?

Because 'mysticism,' according to the all-structuring scientism-religionism détente, continues reflexively to be defined by Islamicists as bad science but good religion, and 'magic' as bad science and bad religion both. Thus al-Bursī, the boldly confessionalist, wildeyed, unscientific Shiʿi traditionist-*cum*-mystic, slots neatly into our religion category, and so his belated popularity among early modern Shiʿi confessionalists is historiographically explicable; thus Dihdār, the sober, experimentalist Shiʿi occult scientist who champions Sunni sources, has been left to fall between the Science-Religion and Sunnism-Shiʿism chairs, and so his equally seminal intellectual influence in the same orthodoxizing scholarly milieu must remain inexplicable—hence the relegation of his lettrist manuals to our latter-day Index of Prohibited Books. But we as intellectual historians are not in the witch-hammering and book-burning business, and are free to investigate the occult science of Safavid Shiʿi empire.

1. Sunni-Shiʿi Lettrism in the Construction of Sunni, Then Shiʿi, Empire

The status of Imam ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 661) as inventor of *jafr* (letter divination) could not but guarantee a perennial interest among Shiʿi and Sunni elites alike in the science of

letters (*ʿilm al-ḥurūf*), or lettrism, Hebrew kabbalah's coeval Arabic twin.[15] Like kabbalah, lettrism came to epitomize the Hellenic-Abrahamic synthesis of late antiquity, predicated on the philosophical fusion of letter and number, and hence of reason and revelation, of nature and scripture: world as (Arabic or Hebrew) mathematical text.[16] From the thirteenth century onward, it naturally emerged as the primary vehicle of Pythagoreanism in Islam. As such, lettrism is manifestly of central importance to any history of Western philosophy-science—for all that modern historians, thrall to an extreme and blatantly colonialist double standard, have celebrated its Judeo-Christianate but ignored its Islamicate iterations to date.[17] For unlike kabbalah, lettrism—simultaneously the most Islamic of the occult sciences in its focus on the Quran and the Imams and the most mathematical-cosmic in its epistemological universalism—became integral to the theory and practice of Persianate universal empire in the globalizing post-Mongol era.

This was particularly the case in Timurid-Aqquyunlu and then Safavid Iran: the sources indicate that a specifically Mamluk-Timurid-Ottoman and thus decidedly Sunni brand of imamophilic-Pythagorean lettrism, constituting both metaphysical theory and scientific-imperial praxis, was an important means whereby Safavid scholars achieved precisely the Shiʿization of Iran. But this crucial, distinctive and paradoxical feature of Safavid Shiʿi culture, to say nothing of the smooth continuity with immediate Mamluk, Timurid and Aqquyunlu Sunni precedent it represents—and thence its Ottoman and Mughal rivals—, has been little noted in the scholarship to date, which remains both occultophobic and fixated on confessionalism as a rule.[18] The few Safavidological studies that do address the science focus almost exclusively on the more flamboyant forms of Twelver lettrist theory, or treat it in passing solely as a form of popular religiosity.[19] None identify the science as central to the imperialist-universalist practice of Safavid philosophy, much less natural and mathematical science.[20]

Al-Ḥāfiẓ Rajab al-Bursī, our first exemplar, stands as a case in point: the heavily lettrist oeuvre of this passionately Twelver Iraqi scholar and refugee among the militant Shiʿi-Sufi Sarbidars ('kamikazes') of Khurasan, and especially his *Dawnings of the Lights of Certain Knowledge: On the Secrets of the Commander of the Faithful* (*Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn fī asrār amīr al-muʾminīn*), indeed boomed in popularity in Safavid Iran, as recent studies have shown. But this boom did not occur before the mid-seventeenth century; and even then the work was panned by more sober scholars for its flirtation with theological extremism (*ghuluww*): for therein al-Bursī, employing an explicitly Ibn ʿArabian-Būnian—which is to say Sunni—mystical-philosophical framework, posits the 14 members of the House of the Prophet as eternal cosmological principles and ʿAlī himself as just shy of divine. For all that modern scholarship too has been attracted like a moth to his extremist flame, moreover, from Henry Corbin (d. 1978) onward, al-Bursī cannot be taken as representative of high Safavid lettrist theory—and certainly not of lettrist praxis. Why, after two centuries of obscurity, did this passionate Twelver lettrist suddenly become so popular among his coreligionists? Who laid the scholarly groundwork?

Here we must turn to our second exemplar, Maḥmūd Dihdār Shīrāzī—the most prolific and systematizing Persian author on applied lettrism of the sixteenth century, aspiring Safavid courtier and teacher in the occult sciences to some of the most influential thinkers of the era. His oeuvre, quite simply, represents the state of the lettrist art among

Safavid and other persophone scholarly and ruling elites through the turn of the seventeenth century. But in sharp contrast to that of al-Bursī, the entirety of Dihdār's oeuvre is devoted to letter magic and letter divination as applied mathematical-Imamic sciences; therein the Shirazi mage lays out a programme, openly adapted from his Mamluk-Timurid-Ottoman model, for the Twelverization of Iran talismanically, which is to say technologically. Also unlike al-Bursī, Dihdār was openly imperialist: he sought, in strictly lettrist terms, to render his intended but ill-starred Safavid royal patron, Ismāʿīl II (r. 1576–77), a millennial sovereign and historical avatar of ʿAlī. He clearly failed in his kingmaking project, as it happened, and was left unmentioned in Safavid royal chronicles – and thence modern Islamic intellectual historiography – as a consequence.

That failure and subsequent obscurity notwithstanding, Dihdār's systematic, experientialist (*tajribī*) approach was of signal and enduring influence, this through its eager embrace by the leading scholarly architects of the new Safavid Shiʿi imperial culture—including in the first place Shaykh Bahāʾī (d. 1621) and Mīr Dāmād (d. 1631) themselves. The first, mathematizing Renaissance man extraordinaire, Safavid Chief Jurisconsult (*shaykh al-islām*) and quite literally an architect of empire, is celebrated in both contemporary accounts and later legends down to the present as the most powerful practicing letter mage of his generation.[21] The second, imperial philosopher par excellence and cofounder of the so-called School of Isfahan, passionately promoted lettrism as applied Pythagoreanism, and hence a primary means of living Islamic philosophy as praxis, of achieving theosis (*taʾalluh*).[22] In both cases, Dihdār's unusually lucid and accessible lettrist manuals offer intellectual and social historians alike invaluable direct access to the lived reality, the daily practices, of these openly self-divinizing Safavid philosophers.

Yet this Safavid mage has been totally elided in the literature, as noted, this while al-Bursī has been celebrated; the history of the practice of Safavid philosophy hence remains unwritten. The present article contributes toward the writing of such a history by situating the *Mashāriq* within the larger intellectual and imperial context of Safavid Twelver lettrism as it developed during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with emphasis on Dihdār's equally seminal but systematic, experimentalist manuals as counterbalance to al-Bursī's theological, unscientific extremism. As I argue, moreover, it is only by forswearing the Corbinian fixation on 'mysticism' that Safavid developments may be restored to early modern Western intellectual history more broadly, including history of science – which history is centrally defined, in the Islamicate world as in the contemporary Christianate, by the Pythagorean-kabbalist push to mathematize the cosmos (the *mathesis* narrative).[23]

In Dihdār, then we have an imperial Shiʿi scientist; in al-Bursī, an apolitical Shiʿi mystic. But let us not overdraw their differences, lest we stumble, yet again, into the same Science-Religion deadfall that has so crippled Western intellectual history. For despite the enthusiasm of the second and the sobriety of the first, both scholars appear to share the same semi-extremist Twelver theology – and both root it firmly in Sunni lettrist theory. Al-Bursī hails the Fourteen Infallibles as cosmic principles, and Muḥammad and ʿAlī together the primordial agents of creation; Dihdār assumes the same, and simply scientizes that doctrine: he claims to have constructed, through long experimentation, the first effective system for harnessing their cosmic potency magically. Al-Bursī's lettrism is explicitly a fusion of Ibn ʿArabī and al-Būnī, of Sunni theory and practice; while the work he became (in)famous for, *Dawnings of the Lights of Certain Knowledge*, is indeed by

turns purely theoretical and traditionist in thrust, it appears he also penned at least one treatise on letter magic. Dihdār's lettrism of almost two centuries later represents precisely the same fusion, albeit with primary emphasis on Būnian praxis over Ibn ʿArabian theory, and explicitly textually reliant on a wider range of Sunni lettrist authorities.

Indeed, their respective emphases on theory or practice aside, the only fundamental ideological difference between our two Twelver lettrists is a function, unsurprisingly, of their separation in space and time: for the fifteenth century that intervened was one of great if gradual sociopolitical and intellectual transformations, and centrally defined in the Persianate world by the Timurid Renaissance. Thus Dihdār is an occult-scientific imperialist in the specifically Mamluk-Timurid mode, as he himself avers; that early fifteenth-century model had emerged by the early sixteenth as a primary basis for jostling Safavid, Mughal and Ottoman imperialisms alike.[24] Al-Bursī, for his part, no Mamluk-Timurid operative, died in Mashhad (or Ardistan) just as this model was beginning to be constructed in Egypt, Fars and Anatolia by members of the New Brethren of Purity scholarly network (on whom more in a moment). Dihdār's commitment to the systematization and dissemination—which is to say, de-esotericization—of lettrist praxis in highly accessible Persian manual form likewise reflects a trend only incipient in the Islamicate heartlands at the time of al-Bursī's death: for it coincided almost exactly with the moment that the Brethren first started writing similarly accessible Persian and Arabic manuals of lettrism for their respective Timurid and Ottoman patrons, proposing therein their models of saint-philosopher-kingship and Islamic universal empire.[25] Dihdār was wholly committed to the same project, unlike al-Bursī, at least in his later reception (the latter's one known treatise on applied lettrism, seemingly no longer extant, may well have been written for his new Sarbidar patrons to a similar end). Yet it is only owing to Dihdār's commitment to the de-esotericization and imperialization of lettrism *à la* the Timurid-Ottoman Sunni Brethren that al-Bursī—the unscientific, extremist mystic suspect to and panned by his more conservative contemporaries—could finally emerge as an integral part of early modern Twelver religiosity.

The Safavid al-Bursī cult of the mid-seventeenth century, in short, is inexplicable without Dihdār's labours in the late sixteenth, and those labours inexplicable without early fifteenth-century Timurid-Ottoman and late fourteenth-century Mamluk precedent. The two lettrists must accordingly always be analyzed in tandem within a larger Mamluk-Timurid-Ottoman-Safavid, Sunni-Shiʿi framework; but they have never yet been.

The balance of this article undertakes just such a long-overdue dual analysis, the first; it is hence necessarily preliminary, suggestive rather than conclusive. I nevertheless propose my approach here as a model for how the decolonization of Safavid studies specifically and Western intellectual history generally on this and other Science-Religion fronts might most efficiently be pursued going forward.

2. Lettrism in Theory and Practice

Before turning to our two sciencers of letters, however, a brief word on the state of the lettrist art between al-Bursī's death and Dihdār's birth is in order, and particularly its neat division into Ibn ʿArabian theory vs. Būnian praxis alluded to above. That division was

first codified in the early fifteenth century by the New Brethren of Purity just mentioned, an influential scholarly network of outspokenly Sunni lettrists and ideologues of empire radiating outward from late Mamluk Cairo northward and eastward to the Ottoman and Timurid realms respectively, and thence to India.[26] Like its namesake, the original Brethren of tenth-century Abbasid Iraq, this confraternity consisted of ardent Pythagoreanizers committed to the cause of occult science. The Old Brethren, however, were neither lettrists nor (at least overtly) imperialists—to the contrary, they worked in strict anonymity, and left lettrism to the Sufis; but the New Brethren—students rather of Mongol globalist imperialism—numbered among their ranks some of the most famed intellectuals and litterateurs of their generation, who sought out, often successfully, circles of power.

Dihdār is emphatic about his status as a latter-day member of the New Brethen. His shared scientific-imperial project aside, our Shirazi lettrist styles himself the direct heir of that network's pivot, Sayyid Ḥusayn Akhlāṭī (d. 1397), Tabrizi Kurdish alchemist-lettrist, personal physician to Sultan Barqūq (r. 1382–99) and rumoured messiah.[27] While Akhlāṭī's own oeuvre is scattered, unsystematic and exclusively practical in tenor, he was teacher to the greatest occult philosophers of the next generation, who first systematized lettrism as universal-imperial science. They include in the first place his deputy (*khalīfa*) in the Timurid east, Ibn Turka of Isfahan (d. 1432), and his deputy to the Ottoman north, the revolutionary Shaykh Badr al-Dīn of Simavna (executed 1420); the latter was an associate in turn of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Bisṭāmī of Antioch (d. 1454), whose voluminous works on the occult sciences generally and lettrism specifically would come to serve as important prop to nascent Ottoman eschatological-imperial ideology, just as Ibn Turka's more streamlined works did for Timurid.[28] Al-Bisṭāmī thus stands as Ibn Turka's Anatolian cognate; but where the former was encyclopedic in his approach, compiling masses of material from hundreds of authorities (most of them Sufi),[29] the latter was philosophically rigorously systematizing and synthetic, and cites few authorities apart from Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240). Where al-Bisṭāmī's lettrism is primarily Būnian, that is, focused more on praxis, Ibn Turka's is primarily Ibn ʿArabian, focused more on theory; and the latter pointedly reformulated lettrism as a mode of theory and praxis distinct from and superior to Sufism.[30] His stated project: to establish lettrism, *contra* both Avicennan peripateticism and Suhravardian illuminationism, as the only philosophically valid form of metaphysics—and the primary theoretical basis of Islamic universal empire.

As a rigorously systematic thinker and exceptionally elegant writer in both Persian and Arabic, Ibn Turka is responsible for the first clear formulation of the Ibn ʿArabian theory vs. Būnian praxis binary that became standard in lettrist circles thereafter. Exponents of the former he dubs the Realists (*ahl-i ḥaqāyiq*); exponents of the latter, the Activists (*ahl-i khavāṣṣ*). As he puts it in his first Persian lettrist treatise, *On the Letters* (*R. Ḥurūf*), written in 1411—the likely year, incidentally, of al-Bursī's death—for the benefit of his first Timurid royal patron and self-divinizing (occult) philosopher-king, Iskandar Sulṭān (r. 1409–14):

> Given that the science of letters is a universal science (*az ʿulūm-i kulliyya*) comprising numerous other sciences under its aegis, each of them important and worthy of purpose in its own right, the practitioners of this science naturally fall into various camps. Generally speaking, however, they may be divided into two overarching groups.

> The first and best-known group consists of those who are concerned with the active properties of the letters (*ahl-i khavāṣṣ*). These investigate the active properties of each letter according to each of its three forms [*scil.*, written, verbal and mental], and hold that the utterance or contemplation of a letter in accordance with a specific description and its associated conditions activates its particular quality either with respect to the levels of the physical world (*marātib-i dunyāvī*) or to spiritual interactions at various levels (*muʿāmalāt-i ukhravī va madārij-i ān*). The exponents of this first approach, including most prominently Abū l-ʿAbbās al-Būnī, have composed innumerable books and treatises on the subject, and make up the majority of those concerned with the science of letters.
>
> The second group consists of those who are concerned with the letters' underlying realities (*ahl-i ḥaqāyiq*). These investigate into the meanings (*maʿānī*) behind the letters and the universal sciences (*ʿulūm-i kullī*) they contain, and understand all types of knowledge and modes of knowing, whether with respect to the divine presences (*ḥażarāt-i ilāhiyya*) or the realms of contingency (*ʿavālim-i imkāniyya*) and all that comes to be in them, in terms of the heavenly Book (*kitāb-i āsmānī*) and the isolated quranic letters (*ḥurūf-i muqaṭṭaʿa-yi qurʾānī*); they likewise apprehend the active properties of everything that has ever manifested or will ever manifest in the universe, each communicating this according to the vigor and capacity of his understanding.[31]

According to this typology, then, Dihdār is primarily a Būnian – or rather Akhlāṭian Activist, and al-Bursī primarily an Ibn ʿArabian Realist; they doubtlessly understood themselves and were received as such. As two of the most famous names in the later Persianate lettrist tradition as a whole, however, they both also fuse theory and praxis to a large extent, as we shall see in the excerpts below.

The same typology is repeated, significantly, in another Timurid-*cum*-Safavid manual of lettrism whose popularity likewise boomed among Safavid elites of the seventeenth century: ʿAlī Ṣafī Kāshifī's (d. 1533) *Amulet of Protection from the Trials of Time* (*Ḥirz al-amān min fitan al-zamān*).[32] The introduction to this seminal, accessible and comprehensive Persian offering—representing the state of the lettrist art as it stood at the beginning of Dihdār's career—features an intellectual history of the science and a classification of its branches; it is this history into which Dihdār explicitly inserts himself.[33] Yet that history is *exclusively Sunni*.

For the rupturous Timurid-Safavid, Sunni-Shiʿi continuity so staunchly performed by Dihdār is epitomized by the careers of ʿAlī Ṣafī and his more famous father, Ḥusayn Vāʿiẓ Kāshifī (d. 1505), Timurid polymath extraordinaire, which together spanned the last decades of the fifteenth century and the first of the sixteenth. Kāshifī Sr. and Jr. were both Timurid imperial preachers in Herat—and ardent *Naqshbandi Sufi imamophile occultists*. Ḥusayn Vāʿiz, of course, is responsible for the *Garden of the Martyrs* (*Rawżat al-shuhadā*), that masterpiece of Twelver Sunnism (*tasannun-i isnā-ʿasharī*), and the eponymous basis for Shiʿi ritual *rawża-kh^{w}ānī* from the Safavid period to the present. But the several important lettrist manuals they penned served as equally crucial vectors for this smooth Timurid-Safavid religioscientific continuity. This includes in the first place ʿAlī Ṣafī's *Ḥirz al-amān*, whose great early modern cachet is testified to by the roughly 100 manuscript and lithograph copies surviving in collections in Iran, India, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Iraq, England and the United States. (Tellingly, a similar number of copies of al-Bursī's *Mashāriq* survives in Iran alone.) Written for a member of the new Safavid ruling elite presumably during the lull between Uzbek invasions, and based exclusively on Sunni and especially Naqshbandi sources, this state-of-the-

art manual advances an occultist-imperialist project that is distinctively, emphatically Timurid: lettrism as the scientific basis for Turko-Mongol Perso-Islamic universal empire. But the *Amulet of Protection*—structured according to a 5-5-12 pattern in honour of the five People of the Mantle (*āl-i ʿabā*) and the Twelve Imams (*ayimma-yi isnā-ʿashariyya*), whom he freely designates infallible (*maʿṣūmīn*) in suspiciously orthodox Twelver fashion, and whom he hails as the inventors of the universal science (*ʿilm-i kullī*) that is lettrism—is also the first manual in the Arabo-Persian lettrist tradition as a whole to be in conception and execution emphatically *Twelver*.

So much for Religion; what of Science? Here too ʿAlī Ṣafī leaves us in no doubt:

> The experiential findings (*tajriba*) of the masters of the letters (*arbāb-i ḥurūf*) stand irrefutable testimony to [the fact that the imaginal forms of the letters can be harnessed to produce effects in the physical world] … Experimentation aimed at manifesting the effects and properties of the letters has often been successfully repeated; and experiment is among the forms of proof that produce certainty (*tajriba yakī az iṯbāt-i yaqīn ast*).[34]

As a category, *tajriba*, experiential assaying, became a major theme in Islamicate and Christianate occultism alike during the fourteenth-seventeenth centuries in particular; geomancers, lettrists, astrologers and alchemists were increasingly emphatic about the tried and true (*mujarrab*) nature of their findings and procedures. This, it must be emphasized, represents a significant departure from Aristotelian precedent, wherein *empeiria* is a mode of general knowledge considerably inferior to *epistēmē*, 'science.'[35] Likewise, medieval lettrist works (particularly those of a Sufi bent) stress the reliability of the chain of authorities from which their knowledge derives, rather than the eminently replicable and falsifiable nature of the science.

Dihdār's frequent assertions as to the experiential-experimental nature of his lettrist operations—some of them, he claims, unprecedented in their sheer rigor—therefore reflect the larger epistemic shift, consciously pursued, that marks the emergence of a distinctive Western *early modernity*.[36] (This shift is encapsulated, intriguingly enough, in the very pennames of our two lettrists, chosen almost two centuries apart: al-Bursī identifies as *Ḥāfiẓ*, the Preserver, but Dihdār as *ʿIyānī*, the Eyewitness.) That is to say, his claims may profitably be understood in a *Baconian* sense; for it must be remembered that the occult sciences too were an integral part of Francis Bacon's (d. 1626) scientific method, that basis of scientific (and scientistic) modernity, for all that historians of science have tended to gloss over this currently unfashionable fact.[37] Indeed, the English nobleman explicitly pursued the rehabilitation of ancient *Persian* magic, as well as alchemy, astrology and various forms of divination, as the core of his new Protestantizing form of natural philosophy: he invoked magic not as superstition but as superstition's cure.[38] That our Safavid mage likewise endeavoured, with some success, to Shiʿize Iran along Sunni lines by means of Persian magic does not make his endeavour less early modern, less Western, less *scientific*.

3. Rajab al-Bursī, Proto-Safavid Extremist Mystic

Whether explicitly or implicitly, all studies or citations of al-Bursī to date style him a late representative of the originary Shiʿi 'esoteric nonrational' (*ésotérique non-rationnelle*) tradition, in Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi's phrase, scene to various stripes of

theological extremism, and hence awkwardly out of step with the 'theologico-legal-rational' countermovement that achieved dominance from the tenth century onward.[39] Now he does, of course, draw freely on the early Shiʿi 'esoteric nonrational' hadith corpus, in some cases rescuing otherwise unattested traditions for Twelver posterity. Indeed, his lettrism aside, this was a primary reason for his eager reception by Safavid scholars, given the ardent *ad fontes* ethos so definitive of Safavid intellectual history generally.[40] Even that sternest of orthodoxizers, Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī (d. 1699), includes al-Bursī's *Mashāriq* and *al-Alfayn fī waṣf sādāt al-kawnayn* among his sources for the monumental *Seas of Lights* (*Biḥār al-anwār*)—though with the proviso that hadiths included therein not attested in any other source must be rejected, since al-Bursī's semi-extremist theological commitment rendered him uncritical and hence suspect.[41]

Al-Bursī's eager excavation of the early Shiʿi tradition made him problematically old-fashioned, to be sure, at least to certain Twelver contemporaries; but his recasting of that tradition *in both Ibn ʿArabian and Būnian lettrist terms* was startlingly innovative with respect to his native Iraqi context of the late fourteenth century – so startling, in fact, that it was not again picked up on until Dihdār did the same in Shiraz in the mid-sixteenth.

Crucially, al-Bursī would appear to be the first Shiʿi author to adopt the neat lettrist cosmology laid out by al-Būnī (d. btw. 1225–33) in the latter's (almost certainly authentic) *Subtle Pointers: On the Secrets of the Supernal Letters* (*Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt fī asrār al-ḥurūf al-ʿulwiyyāt*), as Noah Gardiner's groundbreaking work on the Corpus Būnianam has shown. This the Iraqi lettrist-traditionist does in the introduction to his *Mashāriq*, which closely paraphrases a crucial programmatic passage in al-Būnī's treatise.[42] The evocative title of the second of his works utilized by Majlisī Jr. – *The Two* Alifs*: A Description of the Lords of Both Worlds* – may likewise be assumed to refer to the same passage.[43]

Nor is his marshalling of Ibn ʿArabī any less unprecedented. While he is clearly continuing the synthesizing trend initiated by the members of the Twelver rationalist school of Bahrain in the thirteenth century, including the Baḥrānī triumvirate Kamāl al-Dīn Ibn Saʿāda (d. ca. 1242), Jamāl al-Dīn ʿAlī b. Sulaymān (d. ca. 1271) and Kamāl al-Dīn Maytham b. Maytham (d. 1300),[44] as well as his earlier contemporary Ḥaydar Āmulī (d. 1385) (with Ibn Abī Jumhūr al-Aḥsāʾī (d. after 1501) being an important later exponent), al-Bursī is nevertheless the only one among them to emphasize the *lettrist* component central to Ibn ʿArabī's project—in precisely the same fashion as al-Bursī's contemporary Ibn Turka and the other New Brethren of Purity operative between Egypt, Iran and Anatolia.[45]

It is his total synthesis, in sum, of the two greatest Sunni authorities in the whole of the Arabo-Persian lettrist tradition as framework for a new-old Shiʿi imamology that marks al-Bursī not as an old-fashioned 'esoteric nonrational' throwback but as a scholar very much in step with the most exciting intellectual development of his day: the occult-scientific and especially lettrist revolution then sweeping the Islamicate heartlands. (It must be emphasized that the flamboyant Ḥurūfiyya Sufi movement of Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī (d. 1393), while similarly contemporary, is not directly relevant in this elite Shiʿi-Sunni scholarly context: neither Ibn ʿArabian nor Būnian in tenor, it was denounced as a form of anarchic, satanic perversion by Ibn Turka and al-Bisṭāmī both.[46]) That revolution, as noted, would come to define the turn of the fifteenth century, and serve as a key

theoretical basis for the great Islamic imperiums of the sixteenth and seventeenth. Should he then be considered an honorary member of the Brethen?

Probably not, though ardent imamophiles, these staunchly Sunni scholars were hardly committed to the semi-extremist Twelver imamology al-Bursī pursues in the *Mashāriq* and other works. Nor does al-Bursī, unlike the proudly Akhlāṭian Dihdār, explicitly name himself as a member of that network. Nevertheless, his project must remain inexplicable, a bizarre one-off, absent the context of the Brethren's own: it is here of the utmost significance that the *Mashāriq* itself—destined to become a Twelver bestseller two and a half centuries later—appears to have been written just after our author's sojourn in Cairo, that originary alembic of Ibn ʿArabian-Būnian lettrism, precisely at the height of Akhlāṭī's influence.[47]

While this basic and essential point has been lost on modern Islamicists, not so al-Bursī's early modern, and indeed modern, Twelver audience. The Safavid boom of the al-Bursī industry set Shiʿi scholars to studying al-Būnī in particular—and with even more enthusiasm, it would seem, than their Sunni peers. Sustained through at least the nineteenth century,[48] this enthusiasm served in turn to Shiʿize al-Būnī so thoroughly that the first modern monograph to attempt a study of the great puzzle that is the Būnian corpus, Mohamed El-Gawhary's 1968 University of Bonn dissertation, argues ahistorically for the Shiʿi identity of its Ifriqiyan-Cairene Sufi-mage subject.[49] Given the mania for confessionalism in modern orientalist scholarship, that al-Bursī's Būnian Sunnization of early Shiʿi tradition inspired the latter-day Shiʿization of the Sunni al-Būnī does indeed have a pleasing symmetry!

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This, then, is the historical-textual context in which al-Bursī's lettrist works are to be read, including in the first place the *Mashāriq* itself. Space does not permit a summary of that Safavid blockbuster, which has been ably done elsewhere;[50] I merely translate below a few representative passages that best illustrate both its pronounced Ibn ʿArabian-Būnian lettrist tenor and the semi-extremist nature of its imamology, and hence its rupturous continuity with Sunni precedent.

The *Dawnings of the Lights of Certain Knowledge* includes, as noted, a number of programmatic lettrist passages, including that drawn from al-Būnī's *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt* at the beginning of the work. Al-Bursī's most succinct synthesis of lettrist metaphysics with his theory of prophethood and *walāya* is as follows:

> The inclusive One (*wāḥid*) manifests from the exclusive One (*aḥad*), and from the inclusive One emanates all number (*ʿadad*), just as line (*khaṭṭ*) manifests from the dot (*nuqṭa*), and plane (*saṭḥ*) from line, and body (*jism*) from them all, and just as the letters manifest from the dot, and words (*kalām*) from letters, and meaning (*maʿānī*) from words: all is from One. It is origin and point of return, for *the beginning of [all things] is from You and their return is to You*.[51] The single dot is thus the base reality of all existents (*ḥaqīqat al-mawjūdāt*), the origin of all beings (*mabdaʾ al-kāʾināt*), the center of all circles (*quṭb al-dāʾirāt*)—the unseen and seen world [in its totality]. Its manifest aspect (*ẓāhir*) is prophethood (*nubuwwa*), its occult aspect (*bāṭin*) is *walāya*. Both constitute one Light (*nūr*) in the manifest and the occult [realms] alike, save that *walāya* derives from prophethood and depends thereon: for they are the two names of the right (*al-ismayn al-aymanayn*) that have been wholly united, and serve not except together, naming and discriminating, describing and joining, Prophet and Walī: Muḥammad and ʿAlī. The perfection of both is in the perfection of the one, that of the *walī* from that

> of the prophet. For the Moon draws from the Sun: when she becomes full she is perfect, and when the Sun is away the full Moon holds sway.[52]

So far, Ibn Turka would entirely agree; as an ardent imamophile, the Isfahani lettrist too broke with his hero Ibn ʿArabī to reassign the latter's category of Seal of Universal Saint-hood (*khātam al-walāya al-muṭlaqa*) from Jesus to ʿAlī.[53]

But al-Bursī immediately after embarks on a theological trajectory that his fellow Sunni lettrists cannot follow. He first posits Muḥammad and ʿAlī both as twin cosmic beings, together the primordial Light (*nūr Muḥammadī*) preceding and mediating all creation:

> Muḥammad and ʿAlī are a single primordial light (*nūr wāḥid qadīm*). They have only been nominally differentiated to distinguish between prophet and *walī*, just as the exclusive One is distinguished from the inclusive One. Thus, every exclusive One is also an inclusive One, but not vice versa; thus every prophet is also a *walī*, but not vice versa. It is for this reason that actions will not be weighed on Resurrection Day except according to love for ʿAlī, for *walāya* is the Scale, as mentioned above.[54]

He further declares the Twelve Imams to be an ontological necessity by extension—whence their encodedness in the Two Books, the Qurʾan and the cosmos: witness the 12 signs of the zodiac, 12 lunar mansions, 12 months of the year, 12 hours of day and 12 of night. 'Behold these cycles (*adwār*) with the eye of contemplation (*iʿtibār*), how they proceed according to these secrets by the Almighty's design: *That is the ordaining of the Almighty, the All-knowing* (Q 36:38).'[55]

Similarly, the exalted ontological functions of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib are to be derived through lettrist analysis of the quranic text:

> Therefore desiring to remove the veil from the face of this secret, and to explicate it in such an [uncompromising] fashion as to bring death to those for whom it is death and life to those for whom it is life, I discovered among the secrets of the science of letters with respect to these three verses that [they refer to] the name ʿAlī in allusive and hidden wise. The first is His saying *ʿLYḤKYM* [*sublime, all-wise*] (Q 43:4):[56] its letters are seven in number, corresponding to *Z*, and from them manifest secrets; their numerical value is 188. As for His saying *ALṢRAṬALMSTQYM* [*the straight path*] (Q 1:6), its letters are 14, and their numerical value is [1,012].[57] As for His saying *MALKYWMALDYN* [*the master of the Day of Doom*] (Q 1:4), its letters are 12 in number—from which manifests the hidden secret and occult matter, one of the secrets of the House of Muḥammad for those who are the associates of ʿAlī—, and their numerical value is 242.[58] Those familiar with the secrets of the letters will thus know that *sublime, all-wise* and *the straight path* and *the master of the Day of Doom* refer to ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib (peace be upon him), by command of the Lord of all worldlings.[59]

More: ʿAlī is in fact the Supreme Name (*al-ism al-aʿẓam*), on a par with the two other Supreme Names God (*Allāh*) and Muḥammad, a cosmic semiological trinity similarly demonstrable only in lettrist terms. He pours scorn on all who would object:

> One who is utterly ignorant and hopelessly devoid of understanding, and lacking any share in the great secret, remonstrated [with me] out of his militant ignorance: 'Tell us then how ʿAlī can be the Supreme Name?' I replied: 'You poor, lost fool—know you not that *walāya* is the origin and the end, the first law (*farḍ*) laid down by the Most High (*al-ʿalī*), the first robe of perfection donned by the Prophet, who then donned too the robes of prophethood and messengerhood? How often does one recite in prayer: *I ask of You through Your name by which You created and with which You inscribed all things*?'

I therefore say now to that fool by way of guidance to the truth: Know you not that when we consider the [divine] names and attributes, we find no names greater than these three: the name of the [divine] essence, the name of the attributes and the name *He* (*huwa*), the secret of the essence and the spirit of the attributes, the word that flows through all existents; it is the secret of the essence and the attributes both, and through it all engendered beings are moved to action. The name God (*Allāh*)—*ALHALH*[60]—is the name of the Holy (*al-muqaddas*), and signifies the essence of the exclusive One, the Real (*al-ḥaqq*); the name of the attributes referring to the exclusive and inclusive One both is Muḥammad; and the name that is the spirit of the attributes and the essence both is *ʿLY* (ʿAlī)—the light of light. Each of these three is a Supreme Name. The name of [divine] majesty is the sanctified and ennobled name [*Allāh*], and the name Muḥammad (God bless and keep him and his House) is the manifest aspect of the Greatest Name, for the inclusive One is the form of existence (*ṣūrat al-wujūd*), the spring of being, the manifestation of that numerable (*ẓāhir al-maʿdūd*). But the name *ʿLY* is the manifest occult and the occult manifest (*ẓāhir al-bāṭin wa-bāṭin al-ẓāhir*), the Supreme Name in reality: for it encompasses the secrets of [divine] lordship (*rubūbiyya*), prophethood and *walāya*, the secret of rule and sovereignty, of omnipotence and power; it is the secret of God's free disposition [of the cosmos] (*al-taṣarruf al-ilāhī*). [This is the name] referred to in His saying *his is the sublimest likeness in the heavens and the earth* (Q 30:27)—it is ʿAlī, upon him be peace.

This may be explicated as follows: When you say *ALM*, each of these letters incorporates Muḥammad and ʿAlī (upon them both be peace). When you say *Allāh*, it signifies the essence of the One worshiped, the Necessary Existent (*wājib al-wujūd*). When you say O God (*yā Llāh*), you add the vocative *yā*, utter the name and intend its meaning; for it is the name of the sanctified [divine] essence. And if you lengthen the *u* on its *H*, [producing *hū*], the essence itself appears. Within its letters is contained the name ʿAlī, which in its meaning refers to the essence of the worshiped Lord, and in its letters to the declaration (*kalima*) through which existence itself subsists, to wit: *there is no god but He* (*lā ilāh illā hū*). These are the letters of [divine] transcendence (*tanzīh*), denying and affirming, and they are ten in number—whence His saying *They are ten completely* (Q 2:196); they signify that there is existence no god necessary, living, self-existent, almighty, all-knowing and worthy of worship but God. And the numerical value of its letters comprises the name ʿAlī in both manifest and occult modes.

The declaration therefore means: God—there is no god but God, and ʿAlī is His occult secret, His faithful *walī*, His light that pervades the heavens and the earth.[61]

Thus al-Bursī's Ibn ʿArabian-Būnian lettrist theory; what of his praxis? While the *Mashāriq* contains no passages alluding to how a Twelver lettrist might magically harness the Imams as functions of the cosmos – Dihdār is the first, according to his own claim, to teach this explicitly –, at least one of al-Bursī's known works, *Gleam of an Unveiler* (*Lumʿat kāshif*), appears to be a manual entirely devoted to divine-names and Qurʾanic magic in high Būnian mode.

Given the obscurity in which he languished until the Safavid era, our passionate Iraqi lettrist may well have penned other such manuals that have simply not survived. And even the *Lumʿat kāshif* is not known to have survived past the eighteenth century. As the Safavid biographer ʿAbd Allāh Afandī Iṣfahānī (d. 1717) reports, he consulted a rare copy of this work in Tabriz;[62] no other copies are reported in Iran in Dirāyatī's *FaNKhA* union catalogue. Currently, our only access to al-Bursī's lettrist manual is therefore limited to the three short identified excerpts therefrom—presumably: the title is not given—quoted in Taqī al-Dīn Ibrāhīm al-Kafʿamī al-ʿĀmilī's (d. 1499) *The Lamp* (*al-Miṣbāḥ*), an important collection of Twelver prayers completed in 1490.[63] I translate

them below to provide a small, and doubtlessly unrepresentative, taste of al-Bursī's lettrist praxis, here undistinguishable from the Sunni Būnian mainstream. That praxis may well have included Twelver confessionalist elements in the way Dihdār's would two centuries later—indeed, this is quite likely; perhaps al-Kafʿamī, writing on the eve of the Safavid conquest of Iran, found them too risqué to quote. Barring the discovery of copies of the *Lumʿat kāshif* or other lettrist works attributed to al-Bursī, however, we can only speculate.

> I read in an autograph copy of one of the works of Shaykh Rajab b. Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ [as follows]: Whoso recites the divine name Liberal Rewarder (*al-shakūr*) over water 40 times, then washes therewith an inflamed eye, it will be healed by the leave of God Most High. Likewise with the divine name the Living (*al-ḥayy*) if it is recited over an someone ill or suffering from inflammation 19 times. And among such tried and true [operations] for eye pain or bodily pains generally is seeking the intercession of al-Kāẓim Mūsā b. Jaʿfar (upon them both be peace).[64]

> In one of the works of Shaykh Rajab b. Muḥammad b. Rajab al-Ḥāfiẓ (God's mercy be upon him) it states with regard to the [divine names] the Witness (*al-shahīd*) and the Real (*al-ḥaqq*): Whoso writes them on the four corners of a piece of paper and writes [the name of] what or who has gone missing or vanished in the middle, then leaves it exposed outside for half the night, then gazes at it while repeating these two names 70 times—he shall receive information about that missing or vanished. The same author states: Whoso keeps vigil in the corners of his house for half the night while reciting O Returner (*yā muʿīd*), O Returner 70 times, ending with 'O Returner, return so-and-so to me'—information about that missing or vanished, or the person or thing itself, will come to him the same week. Glory be to Him Who has made His names the repositories for His secrets![65]

> As for the active properties (*khawāṣṣ*) associated with the Most Beautiful Names (which we promised to discuss at the beginning of this chapter), they are multitudinous; we will only mention a few of them here. They include those mentioned, [for example], by Shaykh Rajab b. Muḥammad b. Rajab al-Ḥāfiẓ in one of his works:

- God (*allāh*): Reciting it as a litany (*dhikr*) morning, noon and during the last third of night 66 times [each], without the vocative particle 'O,' will achieve one's aim.[66]
- All-merciful (*al-raḥmān*), Ever-merciful (*al-raḥīm*): Among the active properties of these two names is that one attains divine grace (*al-luṭf al-ilāhī*) when reciting them 100 times after completing each required ritual act (*farīḍa*).
- King (*al-malik*): Among its active properties is that [it ensures] the continuance of one's rulership (*mulk*) for whomever persists in reciting it 64 times daily.
- All-holy (*al-quddūs*): Reciting it as a litany on Fridays 170 times purifies one's inner being (*al-bāṭin*) from vices (*radhāʾil*).
- Peace (*al-salām*): In it is healing for the sick and safety from all plague and harm (*āfāt*); and whoso recites it 100 times over someone ill, he shall be healed by the leave of God Most High.
- Safeguarding (*al-muʾmin*): Its recitation 136 times [gives one] safety from the evil of man and jinn (*al-thaqalayn*).
- Master (*al-muhaymin*): Its recitation as a litany 125 times confers inner purity and awareness of secret truths (*asrār al-ḥaqāʾiq*).
- Mighty (*al-ʿazīz*): Its recitation as a litany 94 times every day just after dawn reveals to one the secrets of the sciences of alchemy and letter magic

(*sīmiyāʾ*); and whoso recites it 40 times a day for 40 days will become free of dependence on anyone.
- Almighty (*al-jabbār*): Whoso recites it 21 times daily gains safety from tyrants (*al-ẓalama*) …
- All-knowing (*al-ʿalīm*): Among its active properties is that it opens the heart of its reciter to all forms of knowledge (*al-maʿārif*) …
- Knower of the Unseen (*ʿālim al-ghayb*): Whoso recites it after ritual prayer 100 times shall have occult matters (*al-mughayyabāt*) revealed to him …
- Avenger (*al-muntaqim*): Whoso recites it much as a litany shall be protected against the designs of his enemy.
- Benevolent (*al-raʾūf*): Whoso recites it in the presence of an oppressor shall see him humbled …
- Self-sufficient (*al-ghanī*) and All-sufficing (*al-mughnī*): Whoso recites these two names as a litany 10,000 times each Friday for ten Fridays [in a row], while observing a vegetarian diet, God Most High shall make him self-sufficient both immediately and in the long term; and if he recites a Fātiḥa therewith, the self-sufficient one shall be granted certainty (*yaqīn*) … .[67]

The slenderness of the surviving textual evidence notwithstanding, Safavid scholarly interest in al-Bursī's lettrist theory sparked, naturally, interest in his lettrist praxis as well. This is suggested by the fact that al-Kafʿamī's quotes were copied independently under the title *Khavāṣṣ-i asmāʾ al-ḥusnā* in at least three surviving miscellanies made between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries;[68] a fourth, surviving in two copies from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries respectively, pairs al-Bursī's letter-magical prescriptions with similar material drawn from Ghazālī and other authorities.[69]

4. Maḥmūd Dihdār, Timurid-Safavid Imperial Scientist

Henry Corbin, phenomenologist philosopher and a founding father of religionism,[70] was most responsible for putting al-Bursī and Maḥmūd Dihdār both on the intellectual-historical map; yet in doing so, paradoxically, he influentially removed them from the same. Corbin's celebration of the first rendered him a timeless representative of Shiʿi 'esoteric nonrational' 'theosophy'—which is to say, of little interest to historians of Western philosophy and science proper, and bodily abstracted from his immediate historical and intellectual context. That context, I here argue, is the ambitious imperialist philosophical-scientific project of the Timurid-Ottoman Sunni Brethren. As for Dihdār, the French sage rightly links these, two of the most prominent Twelver lettrists of the post-Mongol era, as members of the same intellectual-spiritual lineage. (He further links them with Ibn Turka, rightly—but for the wrong reasons.[71]) Our Safavid mage, he asserts, 'un personnage extraordinaire,'

> représente par excellence la théosophie mystique du shî'isme, dans la lignée de Rajab Borsî. Il pratiquait en outre le *jafr*, l'arithmosophie, bref ces sciences qui sont en gnose islamique l'équivalent des techniques de la Kabbale.[72]

Indeed, I wholly concur. The only problem: he has the wrong Dihdār.

A penetrating philosopher but sloppy philologist, with a great flair for selective reading, Corbin could and often did play fast and loose with his sources to nakedly ideological, Zoroastrificationist (*zardushtī-bāzī*) ends.[73] While this provided a sorely needed corrective to the euro-, arabo – and classicocentrism then prevailing in Islamicate intellectual historiography, Corbin – quintessentially modern in his passionate, World-War-weary antimodernism – took matters to the opposite extreme: he imagined history out of existence altogether. His imaginal history of Islamic philosophy thus unabashedly bends a wide range of premodern Muslim thinkers' own projects into tight conformity with his own, and sometimes even conjures philosophers out of thin air[74] – or returns them to the same.

Such is the fate of Maḥmūd Dihdār in Corbin's prestidigitating hands: this, the most prolific Persian author on applied lettrism of the sixteenth century, is here banished from historical existence through conflation with his decidedly less lettrist son Muḥammad. (Any basic familiarity with the writings of both men must clear up this confusion immediately.[75]) For Dihdār Jr., an important mystical philosopher in his own right and importer of Islamic (occult) philosophy to India,[76] much better fit Corbin's perennialist-religionist bill: the modest lettrist component of Muḥammad's oeuvre is safely purely theoretical, i.e. Ibn ʿArabian. Not so that of Dihdār Sr., which is almost exclusively practical, i.e. Būnian. Corbin thereby makes father, at best, a mere footnote to son, and 'those sciences that in Islamic gnosis are equivalent to the techniques of kabbalah' – i.e. lettrism – a mere appendix to true Shiʿi theosophy.[77]

But how was that 'theosophy' or 'gnosis' (problematic terms, to say the least) actually scientifically *practiced*? How was philosophical interiority translated into *technology*?[78]

This we cannot know – absent, that is, an investigation of lettrist manuals like Maḥmūd Dihdār's, which delineate precisely an arena of Safavid philosophical practice, and were clearly utilized as such. Yet Corbin's religionist-antihistoricist hostility to the question of practice – which is to say, occult science—continues to pervade and shape Safavidology. And so Muḥammad's mystical-theoretical treatises have been published in modern editions,[79] while Maḥmūd's equally revealing manuals continue to circulate only in manuscript and lithograph. Even the latter's *Keys to All Locks* (*Mafātīḥ al-maghālīq*), his *magnum opus*, one of the most comprehensive and accessible Persian grimoires of the early modern era and now easily available and much discussed on the Internet, has yet to be cited *even in passing* by any intellectual historian of the Safavid period—much less any historian of Western occultism more broadly.[80]

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To right the extreme theory-practice imbalance that still shapes Safavid intellectual history in particular and Islamicate in general, we need only reaffirm philology, on the one hand, and acquaint ourselves with current findings in Western history of science, on the other, which have served to ambiguate the neat Science-Religion binary that is the basis of the modern constitution and colonialism both, and by extension modern orientalism as a discipline. The lettrist oeuvre of Maḥmūd Dihdār serves admirably for this purpose. For reasons of space, I can only briefly dip into it here; but even that dip, I suggest, is indicative of broader trends that shaped a distinctively Western early modernity.

Specifically, Dihdār's oeuvre as a whole epitomizes two such trends:

1) the push to de-esotericize and indeed democratize occult-scientific knowledge, whence the boom in production of accessible Arabic, Persian, Latin and vernacular (e.g. Turkish, Urdu, English) grimoires;[81] and
2) a progressivist-experimentalist ethos that encouraged the incremental, respectful transcendence of classical precedent.[82]

Both are on full display in his *Choicest Talismans* (*Zubdat al-alvāḥ*), by way of example, a popular Persian manual treating of magical operations based on the Qurʾanic *muqaṭṭaʿāt* and other subtle points (*nukāt-i gharība*) on the science of *jafr* and numbers, including procedures by which to derive the names of angels and jinn (*aʿvān*) for the purpose of incantations.[83] Most remarkably, however, it is this manual that features his unprecedented operation to letter-magically harness the Fourteen Infallibles in their status as cosmic principles, tantamount to the 14 Light Letters (i.e. the *muqaṭṭaʿāt*) themselves. Moreover, it is highly significant in this context that the passage in question cites only ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Bisṭāmī, a leading member of the Brethren, as authority. I translate it in full:

> This wretch, then, having spent a long period and great effort in mastering these sciences, striving mightily in spiritual exercises (*riyāżat*), and forsworn my own pretensions—for the seeker of the All-knowing (*ʿAlīm*) must not pursue worldly claims and aims—, discovered a number of this science's secrets (*rumūzī*) according to my capacity and the measure of my understanding, and through dervishlike focus attained to some part of its effluxive mysteries. This I did by not troubling the spirits for every little thing or doing operations for anyone who asked.
>
> Now that I have reached the point of having discovered, through great exertion, a number of secrets in this science, I do not wish for them to remain veiled so no one can benefit therefrom. Without thought for personal gain, then, in this treatise I explicate several practical methods and various obscure points. It is the responsibility of the worthy student thereof that he not forget this injunction, and that once he comprehends these secrets he refrain from using them for personal ends; so will he benefit from this science to the extent his capacity will allow. *Peace be upon those who follow guidance* (Q 20:47).
>
> It thus is imperative that all the conditions that have been specified for each operation be observed; this applies [in particular] to the drawing of a magic square and deriving its incantation. Thus, for example, we harmonize a 4×4 square according to natural order and derive its incantation as follows:

Constant: 34

8	11	14	1
13	2	7	12
3	16	9	6
10	5	4	15

> In the case of this square, which has 1 in the its first cell, we add 380, producing 381; we subtract 51, the value of – *āʾīl*, leaving 330; we then convert this into letters, producing *ShL*, to which we add back *-āʾīl*: Shalāʾīl. ([Again], it should be noted that such additions accord with the method laid out in the *Gleaming Pearls* (*al-Durar al-nāṣiʿa*) [of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Bisṭāmī], although deriving [angelic] names [without additions] is a higher method.) The fourth cell or second corner has 8, to which we add [380] to make 388; subtract 51, leaving 337; then convert this into letters, *ShLZ*, to which we add back *-āʾīl*:

Shalzāʾīl. The thirteenth cell or third corner has 15, to which we add [380] to make 395; subtract 51, leaving 344; then convert this into letters, *ShMD*, to which we add back *-āʾīl*: Shamdāʾīl. The 16 cell or fourth corner has 10, to which we add 380 to make 390; subtract 51, leaving 339; then convert this into letters, *ShLṬ*, to which we add back *-āʾīl*: Shalṭāʾīl. We then take the balance (*ʿadl*) of this square, i.e. the number of the first house and the highest number in the square, in this case 1 and 16; add them to make 17, to which we add 380 to make 397; subtract 51, leaving 344; then convert this into letters, *ShMW*, to which we add back *-āʾīl*: Shamwāʾīl. We then take the square's constant, 34, and add 380 to make 414; subtract 51, leaving 363; then convert this into letters, *ShSJ*, to which we add back *-āʾīl*: Shasjāʾīl. We then take the total value of the square, 136, and add 380 to make 516; subtract 51, leaving 465; then convert this into letters, *TSH*, to which we add back *–āʾīl*: Tashāʾīl—the name of the ruling angel (*malak-i aʿẓam*) [of this square].

Some practitioners, however, do not add [380] to those numbers from which [51] may be subtracted, which method is equally correct; but if one does add, it is better to do so throughout. A [square] that immediately admits of subtraction does not need additions throughout, as when a square is written and its specific number is harmonized. This would be the case in the above square, for example, were a number greater than 51 to be in its first cell.

We now turn to the overall secret of this square, and [specifically to] the name of its [jinn] helpers and its ruling [divine] Name (*ism-i aʿẓam*)—neither of which have been recorded in any square or mentioned by any practitioner. But this wretch will do so here.

Know, then, that the center cell of this 4×4 square and its number is the combination of the square's four central cells, whose total value is equivalent to the square's constant [(here 34)]. The divine Name or Names that correspond to this number are to be found. This number is different from that that produces the names of the angels, and in the case of this square is equivalent to the Names All-giving (*Wahhāb* = 14) and Guide (*Hādī* = 20); these are the invocation Names (*qasam*) of this square. The other eight cells between the corners are the eight names of its helpers, [being derived the standard way] with *–yūsh* added from outside and without its value being subtracted. In squares in which 380 is not added, however, or *-āʾīl* is added to the names of the angels from outside, the names of the helpers must be treated the same way, such that the value of *–yūsh*, 316, is first subtracted and the remainder converted to letters. For example, the first cell to the left of the first corner is 14, to which we add 380 to make 394; subtract 316, leaving 78; then convert this to letters, *ʿḤ*, to which we add back *–yūsh*: ʿAḥyūsh. The remaining seven cells are to be subjected to the same procedure—so understand. And the incense appropriate to this talisman is generally white ambergris or frankincense (*laban-i albān*), which may be boiled with rosewater in a censer or burnt in particle form.

A subtle point in this connection: Know that four may be repeatedly subtracted from the constant number of a square until four or less remains. If four remains, the square is earthy; if three, watery; if two, airy; if one, fiery—so understand, and put the square into operation according to the number that remains. One may also subtract three repeatedly from the same until three or less remains. If three remains, the square pertains to animals; if two, to plants; if one, to minerals. Those who put these subtle points into operation will achieve their aim, so understand.

That which has been written so far as to the active properties (*khavāṣṣ*) of magic squares based on the Light Letters and Qurʾanic *muqaṭṭaʿāt* has been written quickly and without reflection, and as such should be comprehensible even to the dullest wit. We shall now proceed to discuss the rest of the [appropriate] magic squares—and God knows best the truth of things.

Dear friend, know that when one purposes to perform an invocation based on the Light Letters (*daʿvat-i nūrānī*)[84] at the beginning of the month, as described above, one must first satisfy several conditions and only then begin. First, before reciting incantations, on each day of these 14 days one should draw a square (*lawḥ*) named for one of these 14 precious souls and seek help from its revelatory spirit, for they are the keepers of the treasure of divine knowledge and the most percipient knowers of the secrets of the unseen realm, so that its great spirit may elevate your state and protect you from danger.

Then, on the first day, having sought by way of blessing the mediation (*tavassul*) of the purified spirit and fragrant form of the holy Seal of the prophets and master of the messengers Muḥammad, the Messenger of God, arrange a [3 × 3] Moon square named for this holy eminence and offer prayers to the revelatory spirit of that holy eminence and his noble House according to the constant of that square, [i.e. 333], repeating this litany of prayers the same number of times throughout the 14-day period:

Constant: 333

Abū l- 40	Qāsim 201	Muḥammad 92
Foremost (*sābiq*) 163	Pole (*quṭb*) 111	Eraser (*māḥī*) 59
Perfected (*mukammal*) 130	Beauteous (*ṭayyib*) 21	Pure Beloved (*naqī ḥabīb*) 182

On the second day, make a square according to the name of the holy eminence ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, the triumphant Lion of God, Commander of the Faithful, Leader of the Godfearing and the Faith. On the third day, arrange one according to the name of the exalted eminence and Best of Women Fāṭima al-Zahrāʾ (God keep her). (Know that the name of her exalted eminence, the Best of Women, is so written [after ʿAlī] because the science that the holy eminence and Commander of the Faithful (God keep him) invented (*vażʿ*), [a science] that allows one to predict future events until the end of time, is called the Codex (*muṣḥaf*) of Fāṭima—neglect not this point, and understand!) The same procedure should be followed for the next 11 days, every day constructing a square according to the name of one of the Imams until arriving at the holy eminence and Lord of Command (*ṣāḥib al-amr*), the Mahdī.

This lowly wretch has expended such extraordinary effort in this matter and so derived and constructed these squares [for the names of the Fourteen Infallibles] as to surpass all previous efforts, this being an instance of spiritual inspiration (*mulhamāt-i ghaybī*); for observing the appropriate times for such operations tells us that they cannot be properly carried out in the absence of a connection with the eternal [divine] emanation (*fayż-i azalī*). This wretch therefore believes that it is quite possible that no other authority in this field has been able to achieve something similar, and if they have it was certainly not with the same degree of finesse, as will be evident to the percipient practitioner.

> The sun's rays need no explaining,
> the muskbladders of Khotan testify to their own fragrance.

[After completing the master square], construct the square for the first day, on the name of the holy Messenger Muḥammad, and write its constant in the edge of the square in special fashion; that is the number of times the square's prayer litany is to be recited—and success is from God:

Constant: 243

Aḥmad 53	Maḥmūd 98	Muḥammad 92
Incapacitator (*muʾjiz*) 120	81	Seeker (*ṭālib*) 42
YS 70	*ṬH N* 64	*ṬSM* 109

Constant: 330

al-Imām 113	ʿAlī bn 162	Abī Ṭālib 550
Pre-eternal Giver (*azal wahhāb*) 52	No god but He (*lā ilāh illā hū*) 110	Most generous of all (*min kull jawād ajwad*) 168
No god but God (*lā ilāh illā Llāh*) 165	Beloved (*maḥbūb*) 58	Beautified (*muzayyan*) 108

[Magic squares for Fāṭima al-Zahrāʾ and Imams Ḥasan, Ḥusayn, Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn ʿAlī, Muḥammad al-Bāqir, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, Mūsā l-Kāẓim, ʿAlī al-Riḍā, Muḥammad al-Jawād, ʿAlī al-Hādī, Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī and Muḥammad al-Mahdī follow]

Thus, over the course of these days one should occupy oneself with this litany of prayers to the purified spirit of the Prophet, repeating it 243 times a day, and requesting the attention (*himmat*) of the spirits of that holy eminence and the Infallible Imams, seeking help from the holy Lord of Command – and God willing, it shall be given.[85]

A confident modern, Dihdār thus scientizes Religion, whether understood in a narrowly confessionalist sense or a broadly Islamic one. But, like al-Bursī, he also religionizes Science—yet *only as a Timurid Twelver Sunni*.

To grasp this crucial point, we need only turn to Dihdār's most explicitly confessionalist Shiʿi work, *Unveiling Secrets* (*Kashf al-asrār*), a mixed Persian and Arabic prose and verse treatise in explication of ʿAlī's famous declaration *I am the dot beneath the B* (*anā l-nuqṭa allatī taḥt al-bāʾ*), and the *bayyināt* and *zubur* of divine names more generally.[86] Most significantly, this treatise features a citation of ʿAlī's Sermon of the Clear Declaration (*khuṭbat al-bayān*) – a primary basis of Shiʿi 'esoteric nonrationalism' – wherein the first Imam claims for himself expressly divine attributes. Specifically, here Dihdār explicates the phrase wherein ʿAlī declares himself to be *the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Occult* (Q. 57:3) – precisely the motto of the New Brethren of Purity.[87] Also of a Bursian tenor are sections wherein our Shirazi mage variously derives the names of Muḥammad and ʿAlī as primordial cosmic pair, as well as the twin Shiʿi doctrinal affirmations 'Muḥammad is the Prophet of God' (*Muḥammad nabī Llāh*) and ''ʿAlī is the Walī of God' (*ʿAlī walī Llāh*), from the word *nuqṭa* ('dot'), from their names' initial letters *M* and ʿ, and from their various associated divine names. (Notably, *ʿAlī walī Llāh* is gematrically equivalent to the divine names All-knowing (*al-ʿalīm*) and Lord (*al-rabb*), thus proving the Imam's status as historical locus of manifestation of

Godlike omniscience and lordship, the scientific and political implications of which are weighty indeed.) Dihdār further gematrically analyzes key terms like Imam, the ontological status of the twelfth Imam and the concept of ʿAlī as the Speaking Quran,[88] as well as the concepts, raised in the *Mashāriq* as quoted above, of ʿAlī as Moon to Muḥammad's Sun, and of the status of both together as the primordial Light:

> *M* opens the name *al-Muḥammad* and ʿ the name *al-ʿAlī*. Said the Messenger of God (God bless and keep him and his House): *ʿAlī and I are from one light—and he spoke the truth.* For *M* (40) plus ʿ (70) equal 110; *ʿAlī* equals 110, which reduced equals 2, which equals *B*; and 2 plus 110 equals 112, which equals "Saint of God" (*walī ʾLlāh* > WLYALLH), whose value is 112.[89]

Finally, variants of most, though not all, in the series of hadiths that open *Kashf al-asrār* occur in either the *Mashāriq* or the *Biḥār al-anwār*, or in both (though two occur in neither).[90] All such features testify, of course, to a perfectly orthodox Twelver commitment on the part of its author, with semi-extremist elements reminiscent of, or indeed explicitly shared by, the *Mashāriq*.

But a closer inspection of *Unveiling Secrets* must muddle any such overneat category of Twelverism, extremist or otherwise. For like ʿAlī Ṣafī Kāshifī's own Twelver manual of lettrism before it, *Amulet of Protection*, Dihdār's offering is explicitly textually based *solely on Sunni authorities*. Almost certainly written during the reign of Shah Ṭahmāsb, the treatise opens by attributing lettrism as a science to the Imams, in standard Sunni-Shiʿi fashion—but then identifies their greatest heirs as being in the first place Sayyid Ḥusayn Akhlāṭī (the author's prime examplar here and elsewhere, as he was to Ibn Turka), then Saʿd al-Dīn Ḥamūya, Abū l-ʿAbbās Būnī, Ibn ʿArabī and ʿAfīf al-Dīn ʿAbd Allāh Yamānī, whose works on the subject, he avers, can only be understood by those committed to serving the House of the Prophet (*ghulāmī-yi ahl-i bayt*).[91] (Dihdār, like Akhlāṭī himself, places great stock by the latter's status as a sayyid.[92]) Dihdār also freely and admiringly quotes verses from the Timurid Sufi masters Qāsim-i Anvār (d. 1434), Shāh Dāʿī Shīrāzī (d. 1465) and the latter's mentor Shāh Niʿmat Allāh Valī (d. 1431)), eponymous founder of the Niʿmatullāhiyya order, specifically from his *On the Secrets of the Letters* (*R. dar Asrār-i ḥurūf*), as well as Maḥmūd Shabistarī's (d. ca. 1340) celebrated *Mystery Garden* (*Gulshan-i rāz*).[93] The *Kashf al-asrār* is, in short, blatantly, irreducibly Timurid in tenor.

Nor is this impression qualified by Dihdār's citation of the proto-extremist Sermon of the Clear Declaration; to the contrary, it is strengthened thereby. For this citation must be read in the context of his son Muḥammad Dihdār's important, full-length commentary on the same, *Dragoman's Epitome: On the Interpretation of the* Sermon of the Clear Declaration (*Khulāṣat al-tarjumān fī taʾvīl Khuṭbat al-bayān*). Written in 1604 in Burhanpur for his 'brothers in faith' (*barādarān-i īmānī*) at the instance of the Mughal commander and famed patron ʿAbd al-Raḥīm Khānkhānān (d. 1627),[94] this work features an expressly *imamophilic* rather than an orthodox Shiʿi opening: the Companions (*ṣaḥb*, *aṣḥāb*) are pointedly mentioned in tandem with the House of the Prophet several times, and the author explicitly identifies the true partisans (*shīʿiyān-i ḥaqīqī*) of the *ahl-i bayt* as being the great Sufi masters (*akābir-i ṣūfiyya*) in the first line of the *baʿdiyya*![95] (The introduction likewise features, unsurprisingly, some lettrist cosmological speculation, as well as a defense of ʿAlī's ability to prognosticate past and future events with reference to the successful conjunction astrology of Jāmāsb.[96]) Coming from a

member of the Safavid scholarly diaspora around the turn of the seventeenth century, Muḥammad's contextualization of this major source text for Shiʿi 'esoteric nonrationalism' in such terms can only be read as a bold throwing down of the Twelver-Sunni gauntlet in challenge to the narrow orthodoxizers of his native Iran. His father, Maḥmūd, chose rather to remain and serve the Safavid state; wisely, the latter accordingly never glorifies the Companions in so open a fashion. Nevertheless, Dihdār Sr. and Jr. both championed total Timurid-Safavid, Sunni-Shiʿi continuity against the agents of religioscientific rupture. Safavidists would do well to heed their example.

As for the actual rhetorical texture of such continuity in practice, the introduction to *Unveiling Secrets* epitomizes the same:

> It will be evident to the illumined minds of masters of certain knowledge and travelers on the path of the manifest religion of the holy Lord of Messengers and the clear roads of the holy Commander of the Faithful that the proper understanding of various manifest principles of the lettrist occult sciences (*ʿulūm-i gharība-yi jafriyya*)—whose nonmanifest secrets are peculiar to the holy Infallible Imams (God's blessings and peace be upon them all)—are restricted to knowledge of what is signified by the dot, the modalities of the letters, the principles of letter permutation (*zubur u bayyināt*) and the promontories of their numerical values, likewise communicated through the allusive expressions of those holy eminences (blessings and peace be upon them). Those who know and operate with this noble and subtle science, who have taken their portion from the harvest of these holy eminences, include [in the first place] that holy guide possessed of sacral power (*valāyat*) Amir Sayyid Ḥusayn Akhlāṭī, as well as the eminences Shaykh Saʿd al-Dīn Muḥammad Ḥamūya, Shaykh Abū l-ʿAbbās Būnī, Shaykh Muḥyī l-Dīn Aʿrābī, Shaykh ʿAfīf al-Dīn ʿAbd Allāh Yamānī and others (God sanctify their spirits), who have written books and treatises in explication of these allusive expressions. Their expositions notwithstanding, these realities and meanings cannot be understood by everyone, save those granted divine aid and who enter upon the track of servitude to the Holy Family (*ghulāmī-yi ahl-i bayt*) in all sincerity, begging of them this most useful effluxion. [...]
>
> Therefore know, dear reader, that this is a rare science and a wondrous secret, and peculiar to the beloved of God's beloved, the triumphant Lion of God and besought of every seeker, the Commander of the Faithful, ʿAlī son of Abū Ṭālib (upon him be blessings and peace). After him it passed exclusively to his noble and heroic sons, then to all those who follow them till the Day of Resurrection: they are the stars of the firmament of religion and the planets of the spheres of sure knowledge (upon them be the blessings of God, the Manifest King).
>
> For as the Lord of Messengers and Seal of Prophets (the blessings of all those who bless be upon him and his House) declared: *I am like the Sun, and ʿAlī like the Moon, and my children like the stars—follow any of them and you will be guided aright* (truthfully spake the Messenger of God).[97] He (blessings and peace be upon him and his House to the Day of Resurrection) likewise said: *I am the city of knowledge, and ʿAlī is its gate.*[98] And said the Saint of God and Legatee of the Messenger of God, Commander of the Faithful and Leader of the Godfearing, ʿAlī the Wellpleasing (upon whom be a thousand blessings and greetings and encomiums) on the knowledge of the dot and the letter: *The first created thing God Most High manifested was the dot. And when the dot beheld its createdness, it prostrated itself. Seeing its humility and gratitude, the Creator approved of its prostration and extended it, whereupon it became an* A*, site of [primordial] increase. Therefore the first of engendered beings manifested was the* A.[99] Thus does that letter's manifestation denote exclusive divine Oneness. For as it has been said: "The first thing God Most High manifested was a notional dot, before the intellect and before every other thing." Said the Saint of God:

Knowledge is a dot that is multiplied by the ignorant.[100] Again: *All the secrets of God Most High are contained in the heavenly scriptures; everything in those scriptures is in the Quran; everything in the Quran is in its Opening [sura]; everything in the Opening is in its opening* basmala; *everything in its* basmala *is in its* B; *everything in the* B *of its* basmala *is in the dot under the* B. *I am the dot under the* B (truthfully spake the most knowing Imam and Saint of God).[101]

Said the perfect Imam Abū Muḥammad Ḥasan, son of ʿAlī, son of Abū Ṭālib (upon whom be blessing and peace): *The knowledge of everything is in the Quran, and the knowledge of the Quran is in the [disconnected] letters at the beginning of the suras, and the knowledge of the letters is in* LA, *and knowledge of* LA *is in the* A, *and knowledge of the* A *is in the dot, and knowledge of the dot is in the primordial knowledge of sempiternity, and knowledge of sempiternity is in the [divine] will, and knowledge of the [divine] will is in the occult profundity that is the [divine] ipseity, and knowledge of the occult profundity that is the [divine] ipseity is in* There is nothing His like (Q 42:11) (truthfully spake the valiant Imam, upon whom be blessing and peace).[102] And said the speaking Imam, the irradiating Sun, the Veracious Jaʿfar son of Muḥammad (upon him and his noble fathers a thousand thousand blessings and peace): *The secret of God Most High is in His books, and the secret of His books is in their letters,*[103] *and the secret of their letters is in the* A, *and the secret of the* A *is in the dot, and the secret of the dot is in inclusive Oneness, and the secret of inclusive Oneness is in exclusive Oneness, and the secret of exclusive Oneness is in the Ipseity, and the secret of the Ipseity is in the Occult, and the secret of the Occult is in the Occult of the Occult and the No-knowing and the Cloud.*[104] Or in another version: *The secret of the dot is in the Ipseity, and the secret of the Ipseity is in the Occult, and the Occult is in the Occult of the Occult and the No-knowing.* Said he also (upon him be blessing and peace): *The dot is the secret of the Command, while the* A *is the secret of Creation* (truthfully spake the Imam of Mankind, upon whom be blessing and peace).[105]

As such, the science of the dot is a most recondite science investigating the reality of the letters and the attributes of the ipseity of the divine essence. Let me therefore embark upon an explication of some part of it, this through the overflowing grace of the All-generous, God the All-knowing King willing.

Know, my brother, that the dot is a gleam from the light of the absolute essence that is the Ipseity, which resides in the Occult and the Occult of the Occult and the No-knowing and the Cloud; and that gleam manifests its sublime, glorious and pure attributes of Will and Love, manifested in Command and Creation respectively. For as the Most High said in a holy hadith: *I was a hidden treasure, but loved to be known; so I created creation in order to be known*.

The origin of all letters is the dot in the center of a circle: ⊙. This dot self-manifests from the center to the circumference by way of the two dots governing all divine attributes, to wit, the gleamings of Beauty (*jamāl*) and Majesty (*jalāl*): ⁝. This is the exclusive union encompassing all the levels of the written letters and their ascending and sensible forms as comprised by their peculiar features, which forms and entities are but veils. The relation of these forms to the cycling of letters and words is that of the first entification to that entified among the various levels of the entities behind engendered existents. The manner in which they comprehensively efflux through all existents, whether intelligible or sensible, and manifest among the universals, is as follows: ∴. The center [dot represents] the absolute reality, and its circumference the secret of the Universal Spirit, the Universal Intellect and the Universal Soul.

As for the motion of the dot, it has two modes: linear, thusly: ⁞, and circular, thusly: ⁘. The linear motion is the secret of the exclusive Oneness that is the *A*, denoting the Command and manifestation and their secreting, while the circular motion is the secret of the eight positive divine names. The reality of the dot is by virtue of its occultation in

> the form of the *A* yet manifestation thereby; the form of the *A* is likewise occulted in the forms of the written letters yet manifests thereby, as well as by the oral articulation of the letters through the extension of human breath. The reality of the *A* likewise is the secret of the supernal Pen through its graphic correspondence. For as the Chief of Messengers and the Seal of Prophets, Muḥammad, the Chosen One (God bless and keep him and his Family) said: *The first thing God created was the Pen*.[106]
>
> Given that the *A* is the unificatory form of the dot, through which its reality subsists, the dot is its constituter, for all that it is subsumed and veiled thereby. The *bayyināt* of the *A* are therefore the secret of inclusive Oneness, that is, the root of Manyness and origin of the Names, as definitively stated in the clearest of terms in the divine Book and Speech: *By means of the clear signs* (bayyināt) *and the books* (zubur) (Q 3:184, 16:44) and *He has reckoned everything by number* (Q 72:28).[107]

And finally, an instance of Maḥmūd Dihdār in Alid devotional mode, likewise from this, the most (Sunni) Twelver work in our Shirazi mage's oeuvre:[108]

> This point on the dot of the *B* (ب)
> have I boldly declared to faithful friends:
> The 1 with 1 here in view
> makes 11 by reckoning,
> and when the dot increases further
> a treasury of secrets is revealed therein:
> the two 1s within the dot
> may both be raised by levels.
> When these two 1s are befriended by the dot
> each are considered the beginning of multiplicity:
> for when the dot aids these two
> it makes the first 10 and the second 100.
> This dot is none other than that of the *B*
> from which manifests the secret of God!
> [That is:] These two forms whose meaning is *O He* (*yā hū* = *YA HW* = 11 11)
> are in the points of *There is no god but He* (*lā ilāh illā hū* = *LAALHALAHW* = 110)—
> and 110 is the secret behind the letters of ʿAlī's name
> from which manifests the mystery of the Creator.
> My purpose in this exposition is to glorify him
> whose sweet fragrance fills my senses!
> His name restores my soul,
> its utterance feeds my spirit and body both,
> remembrance of ʿAlī is my eternal heart's litany,
> the *nādi ʿAlī* on my lips forever.
> Thus repeating it I make his name known
> that I may repeatedly profit from its blessings.
> For ʿAlī (*ʿLY* = 110 > 11 > 2 > *B*) is two 1s as shown by this *B*
> whose dot manifests therefrom.
> When the two 1s are properly joined
> they become wholly one in form:
> any who beholds its form
> must immediately count it the letter *B*,
> for the dot beneath it
> removes the veil of that letter.
> How wondrous to witness this—
> these two manifesting in existence as one!
> Two become one to manifest two 1s,

thereby moving multiplicity to unveil herself.
Oneness sits veiled in the *A*
while manyness shows her face in the *B*—
yet it is the dot that is [primordial] Oneness
that manifests so mightily to distinguish the *B*![109]

5. Islam as Magic, Magic as Science, Science as Empire

The famously *sharīʿa*-minded, anti-Sufism polemicist Muḥammad-Bāqir Majlisī, one of the great architects of Safavid Twelver orthodoxy in the seventeenth century, was, as we might expect, no natural friend to magic. Indeed, like many anti-occultist scholars before him, he staunchly upheld the death penalty for sorcery. Yet at least two of his predecessors as Safavid *shaykh al-islām* and fellow architects of that orthodoxy—Shaykh Bahāʾī, Dihdār's greatest student, and Mīr Dāmād, imperial Pythagorean philosopher extraordinaire—were famed as committed occultists. How could Majlisī Jr. as strict jurist square his condemnation of occult science with its sheer ubiquity in Safavid society, high and low alike?[110]

By equating Islam with magic. This he does in a remarkable section of his summary Persian legal work on *ḥudūd* punishments and murder law, *R. Ḥudūd u qiṣāṣ u diyāt*, treating of *siḥr* (Pers. *jādū*) as being among those serious crimes meriting severe punishment.[111] Citing such authorities as Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (fountainhead of Arabic alchemy), al-ʿAllāma al-Ḥillī and al-Shahīd al-Awwal, here Majlisī Jr. first proposes a maximalist definition of sorcery as including everything from planetary invocation and jinn subjugation to soothsaying and amuletry: any technique that attempts to influence others' bodies, hearts or minds falls under this rubric, even harmless illusionism and prestidigitation, as well as all types of talismans, magic-square-based or otherwise—even those harnessing divine names or Qurʾanic verses are suspect.

But our eminent jurist-traditionist proceeds to speak out of the other side of his mouth; he first quotes his predecessor Shaykh Bahāʾī—ultimate Safavid *magus*—to the effect that invoking divine names or the Qurʾan to achieve one's ends cannot be considered magic, then develops a thesis whereby the sorcery so common during the Jāhiliyya simply went largely extinct with the coming of Islam:

> After the dawn of the lights and spread of the effects of the holy Messenger and his glorious House (God bless them all), when [recitation of] the Qurʾan and invocations of the divine names (*duʿāʾ u asmāʾ*) and protective incantations (*taʿavvuẕ*) became common practice among the people—as they are today—, the potency of [pre-Islamic] sorceries became much weakened; indeed, on strong-souled individuals who wholly rely on God they can have little effect.[112]

As clinching proof that magic cannot work in properly pious Islamic environments (read: the Safavid), Majlisī Jr. ends the section by relating a story from his father's friend about a celebrity Indian yogi's visit to Iran in the mid-seventeenth century, where he commanded huge crowds of those eager to witness his feats of magic. The family friend—a self-confessed ardent student of the occult sciences (*ʿulūm-i gharība*)—talked to a fellow occultist who had sought an audience with the yogi, but was ignored. A few days later, however, the yogi urgently called him back and now showed him the greatest respect, saying that his own design in coming to Iran was to ensorcell and enslave all its people, from the shah

and court nobles to the children in the street, but found, to his astonishment, that his magic was wholly without effect. Said the Safavid occultist: 'Of course your magic cannot work—Iran is a land of great piety, every house stocked with scriptures and prayerbooks, every arm fitted with a quranic or divine-names talisman! Your magic can only work among infidels.' Thus foiled, the yogi mage immediately decamped for India (*kufr-ābād*); Iran was again saved from foreign incursion by the unrivaled power of *Islamic* magic.[113]

If even self-styled anti-occultist, orthodoxizing scholars like Majlisī Jr. were constrained to defend occult science so fullthroatedly, we hardly need wonder that the Safavid grimoire industry was booming. We have met Dihdār, chief among Persian grimoirists of the sixteenth century, whose oeuvre, together with the magic manuals of the Kāshifīs, helped spur the occult boom of the seventeenth, and make al-Bursī's *Mashāriq* in particular a new Twelver classic. As for old Arabic classics like the tenth-century Ps.-Aristotelian *Secret of Secrets* (*Sirr al-asrār*, Lat. *Secretum secretorum*) and Maslama al-Qurṭubī's (d. 964) *Goal of the Sage* (*Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*), they again surged in popularity in scholarly circles, the latter in particular being prized as a source for Aristotelian natural science.[114] Even Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037) himself—that Second Aristotle and no booster of the occult sciences—was transmogrified into a Pythagorean lettrist during the same period, chiefly through the labors of Mīr Dāmād, and made author of the grimoire *Spellcasters' Treasures* (*Kunūz al-muʿazzimīn*).[115]

But the Safavid cachet of the specifically Timurid and imperial brand of occultism so successfully purveyed by Dihdār is epitomized by the explosion in popularity of Kāshifī Sr.'s own grimoire *Qasimian Secrets* (*Asrār-i Qāsimī*), on illusionism (*sīmiyā*) and terrestrial magic (*rīmiyā*), which was expanded in the early decades of the seventeenth century to include sections on the three sciences mentioned by the author but deliberately left aside: alchemy (*kīmiyā*), talismans (*līmiyā*) and astral magic (*hīmiyā*).[116] Most significantly for our purposes here, that on talismans includes a wealth of detail as to the identities and activities of practitioners of letter magic during the reign of Shah ʿAbbās I (r. 1587–1629) in particular—in effect, a who's who of Safavid occultism. The single most-cited authority is, not surprisingly, Shaykh Bahāʾī, with Sayyid Ḥusayn Akhlāṭī running a close second; Maḥmūd Dihdār – self-styled Akhlāṭian and Shaykh Bahāʾī's teacher – likewise figures.[117] A number of other prominent scholars and shaykhs feature as master letter magicians (most notably, the philosopher Mīr Ghiyās al-Dīn Manṣūr Dashtakī (d. 1542) is held up as personal lettrist to Shah Ṭahmāsb),[118] and great emphasis is placed on their prized and potent support of the various political actors of their day—even Ibn Sīnā (Shaykh Bū ʿAlī) is cited as a lettrist to be feared.[119] The author of this section—most likely Shah ʿAbbās's court astrologer-geomancer and historian Jalāl al-Dīn Munajjim Yazdī (d. 1619), as Maria Subtelny has shown—presents himself as a member of Shaykh Bahāʾī's scholarly circle, even reporting that the Shaykh once invited him to collaborate on the construction of a magic square at court.[120]

This insider account, ostensibly penned by a courtly author of two occult-scientific manuals in his own right,[121] thus provides us an invaluable window onto Safavid elite culture more generally, and neatly explains that culture's unprecedented embrace of grimoires as manuals of empire.[122] So synonymous did Islamic philosophy and occult science become by the early seventeenth century, indeed, that even Safavid imperial philosophers not known to have authored manuals of magic too became grimoirists in later

memory: the *Mīr Dāmād-i kabīr*, for instance, a Persian occult-scientific miscellany of unknown provenance, remains popular to the present.[123]

6. Conclusion

In Western intellectual historiography as it currently stands, only those medieval Arabic grimoires that happened to be done into Latin, or early modern Latin grimoires heavily dependent on medieval Arabic sources, have merited any serious study.[124] Why have their equally revealing early modern Persian counterparts been almost entirely ignored as irrelevant—even within the small, balkanized subfield that is Safavid studies itself? Why are we moderns drawn to the mystic al-Bursī but repelled by the scientist Dihdār?

The culprit, I submit, is not merely reflexive euro-, arabo- and classicocentrism (though certainly those ideological corsets are crucial hobbles, and all of Renaissance humanist anti-Arabist provenance);[125] it is rather at base a cosmological ill, a blind acceptance and backprojection of the twentieth-century scientism-religionism détente. For that Faustian bargain magically transforms *Islam as magic* into *Islam as religion*, which is to say, *Islam as not-science*. And as mere Religion, early modern Sunni-Shiʿi Islam is therefore easily reduced to Catholic-Protestant analogue—and its magic violently Reformed out of historical existence.[126]

The colonialist-orientalist irony here is especially piquant. For several centuries of Christian witchhunting and bookburning throughout Latinate Europe did not succeed in driving Christian Magic to extinction; to the contrary, the early modern era was the golden age of Western occultism even in Latin Christendom. How much more so, then, the contemporary Persianate world, which failed to have a witch craze, which was rather scene, in terms of sheer textual production, to the greatest flowering of imperial Magic in Western history? And yet we modern, reflexively Protestantizing historians have succeeded where early modern Protestant witchhunters failed, and persist in historiographically burning Muslim witches and their books.[127]

But demonologists make poor historians. We have therefore declined to track one of the signal sociopolitical divergences that would come to define Western—here Persianate-Latinate—early modernity. Simply put, where Christian Magic served to reify the cultural rupture that was the Reformation, and never became a primary motor of Christian Empire, Islamic Magic served the opposite end: to thoroughly blur the confessional boundary between Sunni and Shiʿi during the golden age of Islamic Empire.

Let us therefore remove the imperial grimoires of Maḥmūd Dihdār and the host of his early modern Muslim compeers from our modern Index of Prohibited Books, and finally read them for what they are: an especially revealing and indispensable basis for comparative Western intellectual history—which was scene to remarkable cultural convergences to no less degree. One Islamo-Christianate comparison here must suffice. Just as that epitome of Latin Renaissance occultism, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa's (d. 1535) *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* (*De occulta philosophia libri tres*), is heavily, explicitly dependent on medieval Arabic precedent (especially that of the *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*, aka the *Picatrix*), and yet thoroughly Christian in tenor, so too is Safavid Renaissance occultism heavily, explicitly dependent on centuries of Sunni and specifically Mamluk, Timurid and Ottoman precedent.

To focus on a stridently confessionalist mystic-traditionist like al-Bursī at the expense of equally representative sciencers of letters like Dihdār is to disdain this basic feature of Persianate (and Latinate) early modernity—and hence to remove a primary basis for reinscribing early modern Shiʿi philosophy within the history of Western intellection generally and history of science specifically. Any history of its Latin European subset that ignores watershed grimoires like al-Qurṭubī's or Agrippa's must now be considered incomplete at best, and at worst whiggishly perverted. Why should any history of Safavid, Islamicate and indeed Western intellection that ignores Dihdār's many manuals of Sunni-Shiʿi (occult-)philosophical praxis—as all have done to date—be considered any less so?[128]

In sum: The occult sciences were a primary means by which Sunni-Shiʿi intellectual continuity was maintained well into the early modern era of imperial confessionalization. The epochal Shiʿization of Iran was thus in part accomplished by leading Safavid scholars on the basis of Sunni occult science, and in explicit adherence to a distinctively Mamluk-Timurid-Ottoman imperial model. Yet the occultophobia that continues to shape Safavid studies specifically and Islamicate intellectual history generally has made it possible to disappear such robust Sunni-Shiʿi, Mamluk-Timurid-Ottoman-Safavid continuities into a master narrative of religiocultural rupture. This serious distortion, of suspiciously Protestantizing tenor, is made all the more perverting by its enforcement of the colonialist *science-religion-magic* triad, which in turn disappears Safavid philosophy-science from the history of early modern Western intellection—frequently robustly occultist—more generally. To undo these sorcerous disappearances, let us remarry our modern Science-Religion, Sunni-Shiʿi, Timurid-Safavid and Islamdom-Christendom binaries by means of Magic.

Notes

1. On this theme see e.g., Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*; Taussig, *The Magic of the State*; Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*; Schneider, *Culture and Enchantment*; Styers, *Making Magic*.
2. This doctrine is developed in Gould, *Rocks of Ages*; for a representative, devastating critique see Orr, "Gould on God." To counteract entrenched colonialist-orientalist narratives as to the essential un-Westernness of Islam, I propose that the broadest possible cultural-geographical definition of the West be consistently used when writing comparative early modern intellectual history: the half of Afro-Eurasia, incorporating the Arabic, Persian, Greek and Latin cosmopolises, that vast realm where Hellenic-Abrahamic dialectics reigned supreme, and philosophy was pursued in mathematical-linguistic terms; see Melvin-Koushki, "*Taḥqīq* vs. *Taqlīd*." Cf. Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization*; Fowden, *Before and after Muḥammad*.
3. On scientism, religionism and their détente see Melvin-Koushki, "Is (Islamic) Occult Science Science?"
4. On Arabic astrology and astral magic as primary node for the transmission of Aristotelian natural science to Latin Europe see Lemay, *Abu Maʿshar*.
5. For a preliminary survey of the Arabo-Persian classification of sciences (*taṣnīf al-ʿulūm*) tradition from the tenth to seventeenth centuries—wherein the occult sciences, usually explicitly classed as such (i.e., as *gharīb* or *khafī*), constituted roughly half of the natural and mathematical sciences as a rule—see Melvin-Koushki, "Powers of One."
6. On the sanctification, de-esotericization and imperialization of the occult sciences see ibid.; Melvin-Koushki, "Early Modern Islamicate Empire."

7. On this triad and various scholarly deconstructions thereof see e.g., Styers, *Making Magic*, and Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*; on the modern construction of a Science-Religion binary see e.g. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, ch. 12; Williams, "Science"; Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*; Karamustafa, "Islamic *Dīn* as an Alternative."
8. Such data include, of course, spirits (*rūḥāniyyāt*) and other disembodied or differently embodied entities such as jinn, to be harnessed or visibly manifested through material, theurgical means.
9. This is to say nothing of the modern academic discipline of parapsychology – or rather, as a number of its exponents prefer to term their field, *psychophysics*.
10. Such confessional ambiguity, while especially common in occultist circles, was a much broader social phenomenon; it has been variously dubbed *tasannun-i iṯnā-ʿasharī* or "Twelver Sunnism" (Muḥammad-Taqī Dānishpazhūh, Rasūl Jaʿfariyān), "Ālid loyalism" (Marshall Hodgson) and "Shiʿi-Sunnism or "imamophilia" (my own terms).
11. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, chapters 1–2.
12. See Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*; Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität*; Melvin-Koushki, "Imperial Talismanic Love."
13. For an overview of the former's life, works and reception see e.g. Khaleeli et al., "al-Bursī," *EIs*; al-Shaybī, *al-Ṣila*, 2/224–56; Gulī-Zavāra, *Mushʿilī munīr*; Lawson, "*The Dawning Places*"; Lory, "Souffrir pour le vérité"; Rizvi, "Some Notes"; on the latter's see Melvin-Koushki, "Maḥmud Dehdār Širāzi," *EIr*; idem, *The Occult Science of Empire*.
14. Mihrvarz and Ṣūfī, "Pazhūhishī tārīkhī."
15. Space does not here permit, of course, a discussion of the philosophical, and political, salience and historical development of lettrism, topics I have treated of elsewhere at length; see e.g. Melvin-Koushki, "The Quest," ch. 4.
16. Within comparative early modern intellectual history, it is the simultaneously mathematical and linguistic tenor of Western (Islamo-Judeo-Christianate) philosophy—epitomized by lettrism-kabbalah—that most distinguishes it from contemporary Sanskrit and Chinese developments; see Melvin-Koushki, "*Taḥqīq* vs. *Taqlīd*."
17. Melvin-Koushki, "Powers of One"; idem, "World as (Arabic) Text." Kabbalah studies is now an academic industry, while lettrism studies is formally nonexistent—this despite the fact that far more lettrist texts have come down to us than kabbalist.
18. On this smooth Safavid-Mughal-Ottoman occult-scientific continuity, driven by the great diaspora of Safavid occultists seeking richer patronage abroad, see Melvin-Koushki, "The Occult Sciences in Safavid Iran." This is not to suggest that Safavid imperial confessionalism was not often violently anti-Sunni both rhetorically and corporally—it certainly was, and many Sunni scholars fled Iran as a consequence (see e.g. Stanfield-Johnson, "The Tabarra'iyan and the Early Safavids"; on the Sunni-Shiʿi *convivencia*—especially under Dihdār's patron Ismāʿīl II—that nevertheless persisted see idem, "Sunni Survival in Safavid Iran"). My argument is rather that Safavid anti-Sunnism, in sharp contrast with contemporary Protestant anti-Catholicism, was greatly tempered and complicated by the Shiʿi scholarly embrace of Sunni magic.
19. Exceptions to this rule include Babayan, "The Cosmological Order," and Gruber, "The 'Restored' Shīʿī *muṣḥaf*." As the latter study rightly points out, however, the occult science that bound the Safavid and Ottoman realms together as a Persianate cultural unit also served as an important site for confessionalization—though only *rhetorically*; branding aside, theory and praxis remained essentially textually identical.
20. I do so in Melvin-Koushki, "World as (Arabic) Text," this in answer to Sajjad Rizvi's recent call, following Pierre Hadot, to finally write the history of the practice of Safavid philosophy ("Philosophy as a Way of Life"). This theme is developed more fully in my forthcoming *The Occult Science of Empire in Aqquyunlu-Safavid Iran*.
21. For references see ibid.
22. Melvin-Koushki, "World as (Arabic) Text."
23. Melvin-Koushki, "Powers of One."

24. Melvin-Koushki, "Early Modern Islamicate Empire."
25. Melvin-Koushki, "Of Islamic Grammatology," 75–6, 80.
26. On the New Brethren of Purity see Fleischer, "Ancient Wisdom"; Fazlıoğlu, "İlk Dönem Osmanlı İlim"; Binbaş, *Intellectual Networks*, 3–15; Melvin-Koushki, "The Quest," 16–19; Melvin-Koushki, "The New Brethren."
27. Tellingly, Dihdār is credited with a recension of Akhlāṭī's *Z̲akhāʾir al-asmāʾ*, and his own *Javāhir al-asmāʾ*, among the most popular of his writings, appears to be a loose summary of the same work; Akhlāṭī is also the most-cited authority in his seminal grimoire *Keys to All Locks* (*Mafātīḥ al-maghālīq*). See Melvin-Koushki, *The Occult Science of Empire*.
28. Fleischer, "Ancient Wisdom."
29. Gardiner, "Occultist Encyclopedism."
30. As e.g., in his important treatise *On the Splitting of the Moon and the Last Hour* (*R. Shaqq-i qamar u bayān-i sāʿat*), completed in 1426; for an analysis see Melvin-Koushki, "The Quest," chapter 6, and for a translation see ibid., 454–62.
31. Ibn Turka, *R. Ḥurūf*, edited and translated in Melvin-Koushki, "The Quest," 466, 479–80.
32. For a summary of this pivotal grimoire see ibid., 271–80; it is studied and contextualized in Melvin-Koushki, *The Occult Science of Empire*. Significantly, here ʿAlī Ṣafī rather attributes this division to al-Būnī himself and identifies Ibn Turka as a renowned master of both approaches. The Safavid biographical dictionary of ʿAbd Allāh Afandī Iṣfahānī (d. 1717), *Riyāḍ al-ʿulamāʾ wa-ḥiyāḍ al-fuḍalāʾ*, uses the occasion of its entry on ʿAlī Ṣafī to discuss lettrism as a mainstream science, to this end summarizing that work's introduction (3/435–9).
33. Another important intellectual history of lettrism is provided by the great Ashʿari philosopher-occultist Jalāl al-Dīn Davānī (d. 1502)—a major source, of course, for Safavid philosophy—in his *A Spiritual Boon: On the Active Properties of Letters* (*Tuḥfa-yi rūḥānī fī khavāṣṣ al-hurūf*); see Melvin-Koushki, "The Quest," 247–55. This similarly pivotal Persian manual is edited, translated and analyzed in Melvin-Koushki, *The Occult Science of Empire*.
34. Kāshifī, *Ḥirz al-amān*, MS Majlis 15708/1 f. 7b; lithograph, Lucknow, 1873, 10; trans. in Melvin-Koushki, "The Quest," 280.
35. My thanks to Nicholas Harris for this observation. As that may be, however, the empirical nature of occult science was already asserted by such authorities as Abū Maʿshar al-Balkhī (d. 886), father of conjunction astrology, who influentially declared his discipline to be a science founded on analogical reasoning (*qiyās*) and experience (*tajriba*), the latter entailing observation (*muʿāyana*) and direct discovery (*al-wujūd al-ḥāḍir*) (Burnett, "The Certitude of Astrology," 210, 212). An identical argument is made for medicine by Ibn Hindū (d. 1019 or 1029), who rather uses the terms *raṣad* and *mushāhada* for observation and personal inspection respectively (Gutas, "Certainty, Doubt, Error," 279–80).
36. Melvin-Koushki, "*Taḥqīq* vs. *Taqlīd*."
37. See e.g., Langman, "The Future Now."
38. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Enlightenment*, 44–51.
39. See e.g., Amir-Moezzi, "Aspects de l'imāmologie duodécimaine I," 206; idem, *The Spirituality of Shiʿi Islam*, 120, 171, 225, 328, 382.
40. On this ethos see Pourjavady and Schmidtke, "An Eastern Renaissance?"; Melvin-Koushki, "*Taḥqīq* vs. *Taqlīd*."
41. Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, 1:10.
42. Al-Bursī, *Mashāriq*, 29–31; cf. the (very defective) edition of al-Būnī's treatise in Coulon, "La magie islamique," 2:64–180/394: 67/394. My thanks to Noah Gardiner for alerting me to this fact; he translates and analyzes the passage in question in "Esotericism in a Manuscript Culture," 191–218.
43. Al-Būnī, of course, who here proposes *nubuwwa* and *walāya* as both twin primordial lights and twin primordial *alifs*, does not consider the latter category to be exclusive to ʿAlī (ibid., 202–4).
44. On whom see Bdaiwi, *Philosophy, Theology, and Mysticism*; Al-Oraibi, "Shīʿī Renaissance."

45. While Āmulī, as a devotee of Ibn ʿArabī, does naturally draw on lettrist theory at times—the introductory sections of his commentary on the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* feature, most notably, several lettrist diagrams of explicitly Twelver bent (*al-Muqaddimāt min Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, plate nos. 3, 7–9)—, he does not make it central to his project in the manner of his later contemporary al-Bursī.
46. Melvin-Koushki, "The Quest," 417–18, 428–33; Fleischer, "Ancient Wisdom," 234–5; cf. al-Shaybī, *al-Ṣila*, 244.
47. My thanks to Noah Gardiner for this observation. As al-Shaybī points out, the assumption on the part of some later biographers that al-Bursī completed the first recension of the *Mashāriq* as early as *ca.* 773/1372—i.e., well before Akhlāṭī's arrival in Cairo—is without foundation; as for the second and final recension thereof, perhaps made in response to criticisms levelled at the first, and the basis for all modern printings, it seems to have been completed in 813/1410, shortly before his death (*al-Ṣila*, 229–30; see also Bīdābādī, "Muʿarrifī-yi *Mashāriq*," 161).
48. The *Mashāriq* is preserved in at least 108 MSS surviving in Iran alone, some 24 of them dating to the seventeenth century; it was first translated into Persian in the nineteenth century by one Muḥammad Ṣādiq b. ʿAlī-Riżā (MS Marʿashī 10182; see Dirāyatī, *DNA*, 9:569–73).
49. Gardiner, "Esotericism," 104 n. 211; El-Gawhary, "Die Gottesnamen im magischen Gebrauch," 14.
50. See e.g. Lawson, "*The Dawning Places*"; on its sources and reception see Bīdābādī, "Muʿarrifī-yi *Mashāriq*."
51. The phrase *badʾu-hā min-ka wa-ʿawdu-hā ilay-ka* comes from the prayer of divine Oneness (*duʿāʾ al-tawḥīd*): *Allāhumma innī asʾalu-ka bi-maʿānī jamīʿi mā yadʿū-ka bi-hi wulātu amri-ka … .*
52. Al-Bursī, *Mashāriq*, 58.
53. Ḥaydar Āmulī, similarly drawing on Ibn Turka's other primary lettrist authority Saʿd al-Dīn Ḥamūya (d. 1252), does the same; but he further identifies Ibn ʿArabī's Seal of Muḥammadan Sainthood with the Mahdī, who for him is the Twelfth Imam, which Ibn Turka, significantly, declines to do (see Melvin-Koushki, "The Quest," 344; Mansouri, "*Walāya*"; Viengkhou, "*Tawḥīd* Divided"; Uy, "Lost in a Sea of Letters").
54. Al-Bursī, *Mashāriq*, 99; see also 58.
55. Ibid., 167–8. On the lettrist salience of the term *iʿtibār* from the thirteenth century onward, see Casewit, *The Mystics of al-Andalus*.
56. Q 43:4 in full: *For lo, it is in the Mother of the Book, with Us—sublime, all-wise.*
57. The edition has 1013, and the earlier, defective printed text 1011.
58. The defective text has 232.
59. Al-Bursī, *Mashāriq*, 235.
60. Thus in the edition.
61. Ibid., 246–48.
62. Afandī, *Riyāḍ al-ʿulamāʾ*, 305.
63. Al-Shaybī, *al-Ṣilah*, 2:234.
64. Al-Kafʿamī, *al-Miṣbāḥ*, 200.
65. Ibid., 208.
66. I.e., the number of times one is to recite a divine name as litany generally corresponds to its numerical value.
67. Ibid., 415–19. Al-Kafʿamī's extended quotation of al-Bursī addresses 89 divine names in total; for reasons of space I give only the above 16 as representative.
68. Dirāyatī, *DNA*, 4:1034: Tehran, MS Majlis 3457/209 pp. 290–300; Tehran, MS Millī 2706/21 pp. 98–100; Mashhad, MS Astān-i Quds Ż11201. Masʿūd Bīdābādī notes the existence of a fourth copy in the Ṭabasī Ḥāʾirī Library ("Muʿarrifī-yi *Mashāriq*," 144). While I unfortunately did not have access to these manuscripts at the time of writing, it would appear that at least some of al-Bursī's text as preserved here was translated into or summarized in Persian.

69. Dirāyatī, *DNA*, 4:1033: Qom, MS Marʿashī 12677/30 pp. 215–8; Tehran, MS Majlis 10147/16 pp. 260–81. On Ghazālī's reception as lettrist authority in the Safavid period see Melvin-Koushki, "The Quest," 246 n. 279, 274.
70. On Corbin as a leading member of the Eranos circle, see Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*.
71. Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, 456–7; cf. Melvin-Koushki, "The Quest," 6–11, 69–77,
72. Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, 461.
73. Walbridge, *The Wisdom*, 107–10; see also Rizvi, "Philosophy as a Way of Life," 35–36.
74. Embellishing an error by Hellmut Ritter (d. 1971), for instance, Corbin celebrated the fictitious "Vadūd Tabrīzī" as an important Suhravardian philosopher; see Pourjavady, *Philosophy in Early Safavid Iran*, 45–53.
75. Corbin, it should be noted, is far from the only scholar to confuse father and son; a case in point is Maḥmūd Dihdār's biographical entry in Aḥmad Karīm Ishrāq's *Buzurgān-i Jahrum* (337–8), which first notes this persistent confusion, then proceeds to fall prey to the same.
76. Unlike his father, Muḥammad Dihdār Shīrāzī (d. 1607), protégé of Mīr Fatḥ Allāh Shīrāzī (d. 1589)—another noted occultist—, chose to emigrate to India; he is famously reported to have been responsible for persuading his ʿĀdilshāhī patron to lure his teacher there with a large gift of money, thereby inaugurating a tradition of philosophical instruction in the Mughal Empire (Melvin-Koushki, "Maḥmud Dehdār Širāzi," *EIr*).
77. The same pattern defines Ibn Turka's reception in modern scholarship: the central lettrist thrust of his project is relegated to an afterthought through an exclusive focus on unrepresentative, less obviously occultist works.
78. Colin Turner's proposed internalism-externalism binary, standing for esoteric, experiential knowledge of God and exoteric, juristic knowledge of God's laws respectively (*Islam without Allah?*, 43–6), is highly problematic in this context: it implies quintessentially *bāṭinī*, mathematical-Imamic sciences like lettrism were not as a rule deployed to very *ẓāhirī*, magical ends, thereby leaving the rational-revelational divide occult-scientifically unbridged.
79. Thus, his *Sharḥ-i Khuṭbat al-bayān* and those works in *Rasāʾil-i Dihdār*.
80. A Google search on this title, unique to Dihdār, returns over 17,000 hits in Arabic and Persian (March 2020), with regular citation on boards dedicated to lettrism, and a number of websites in Iran sell pdfs of a nineteenth-century manuscript facsimile.
81. See Melvin-Koushki, "Of Islamic Grammatology."
82. See Melvin-Koushki, "*Taḥqīq* vs. *Taqlīd*."
83. At least 19 MS copies survive in Iran alone, and there exists at least one lithograph printing (Bombay 1301/1883) (Dirāyatī, *DNA*, 5/1203). The treatise is edited, translated and studied in my forthcoming *The Occult Science of Empire*.
84. I.e., the half of the Arabic alphabet represented by the *muqaṭṭaʿāt*, the isolated letters that open certain quranic suras.
85. Dihdār, *Zubdat al-alvāḥ*, 14–19.
86. When performing *taksīr* (cognate to Hebrew *temurah*), which involves the separation of the letters of a name or word and the writing out of the letternames in full, then the elimination of repeated letters (e.g., Aḥmad → *AḤMD* → *ALFḤAMYMDAL* → *ALFḤMYDL*), the term *zubur* refers to the first letters in the full letternames (e.g., the *A* in *ALF*) and *bayyinat* to the remaining letters (e.g., *LF* in *ALF*); both terms derive from Q. 3:184, 16:44, 35:25. For a translation of Dihdār's *Kashf al-asrār*, see Melvin-Koushki, "Occult Ecumenism."
87. Dihdār, *Kashf al-asrār*, 148a; see Melvin-Koushki, "Imperial Talismanic Love," 66, 84.
88. Ibid., f. 158a On this tradition of ʿAlī (*anā kalām Allāh al-nāṭiq*), taken from the *kuṭbat al-iftikhār*, see e.g. Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, 30/546, 79/199; al-Bursī, *Mashāriq*, 260.
89. Dihdār, *Kashf al-asrār*, 149b.
90. This section is translated below.
91. Ibid., f. 141a. On Ḥamūya in particular, with Ibn ʿArabī and Būni a major source for the New Brethren, see Uy, "Lost in a Sea of Letters."

92. Akhlāṭī asserts, significantly, that only *sayyid*s can construct comprehensive prognosticons (Melvin-Koushki, "The Quest," 288).
93. Dihdār, *Kashf al-asrār*, 147b, 149a, 156a. On Ibn Turka's association with both Timurid Sufi masters see Melvin-Koushki, "The Quest," 51, 62, 137, 141, 145, 224–35, 391, 491, 421.
94. Dihdār, *Sharḥ-i Khuṭbat al-bayān*, 37, 150. Appropriately, its terminal chronogram, encoding the date 1013 AH, is *fayż-i jūd-i ʿAlī*, 'effluxion of ʿAlī's grace.'
95. Ibid., 35. Cf. Ḥaydar Āmulī's total equation of Twelver Shiʿism and Sufism (al-Shaybī, *al-Ṣila*, 2/104–5).
96. Ibid., 45–51.
97. Cf. Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, 16:91, 23:156, 164, 24:74; al-Bursī, *Mashāriq*, 58, 321–22.
98. Cf. Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, 40:87 et passim; al-Bursī, *Mashāriq*, 37.
99. This hadith is not present in either the *Mashāriq* or the *Biḥār al-anwār*.
100. Cf. Ibn Abī Jumhūr al-Aḥsāʾī (d. after 1501), *ʿAwālī l-laʾālī al-ʿazīza*, 4:129.
101. Cf. al-Bursī, *Mashāriq*, 31.
102. Cf. al-Bursī, *Mashāriq*, 35. The same hadith is attributed to al-Ḥallāj (*Akhbār al-Ḥallāj*, 99–100).
103. I.e., the *muqaṭṭaʿāt*.
104. A version of this hadith also occurs in the apocalyptic prophecy of Ibn Talḥah (d. 1265), *al-Durr al-munaẓẓam*, 63.
105. This hadith is not present in either the *Mashāriq* or the *Biḥār al-anwār*.
106. Cf. Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, 54:313, 362–63, et passim.
107. Dihdār, *Kashf al-asrār*, 140b–6a.
108. Dihdār's manuals, it should be noted, contain many such sections of didactic couplet verse, a feature that only enhances their overall accessibility and pedagogical utility.
109. Dihdār, *Kashf al-asrār*, 152a–b.
110. The same principle applies to wine consumption, similarly ubiquitous; see Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure*.
111. Majlisī, *Ḥudūd u qiṣāṣ u diyāt*, 53–7.
112. Ibid., 55.
113. Ibid., 55–7.
114. My thanks to Sajjad Rizvi for this observation.
115. See the edition by Jalāl al-Dīn Humāʾī; Melvin-Koushki, "World as (Arabic) Text." As noted, a similar process occurred with Ghazālī, likewise hostile to occultism as of a piece with Ismaʿilism (see n. 69 above).
116. The definitive study to date of this seminal Timurid-Safavid grimoire is Subtelny, "Kāshifī's *Asrār-i qāsimī*"; see also Lory, "Kashifi's *Asrār-i Qāsimī*." As Subtelny argues, its title most likely refers to the Timurid Sufi shaykh Qāsim-i Anvār—whom Dihdār, significantly, likewise quotes in his *Kashf al-asrār*. For a broader contextual study of both texts see Melvin-Koushki, *The Occult Science of Empire*. That Safavid elite interest in the *Asrār-i Qāsimī* was already evident in the early sixteenth century is indicated by the fact that ʿAlī Ṣafī produced a simplified version of this work in 1522 at the request of Durmish Khan Shāmlū (d. 1526), Safavid governor of Isfahan and then Herat; this version is titled *Tuḥfa-yi khānī*, aka *Kashf al-asrār*, and like its source treats only of *sīmiyā* and *rīmiyā* (see e.g. MS Majlis 1065/5, 175–256; Subtelny, "Kāshifī's *Asrār-i qāsimī*"; Melvin-Koushki, "The Quest," 272). As here, *kīmiyāʾ*, *līmiyāʾ*, *hīmiyāʾ*, *sīmiyāʾ* and *rīmiyāʾ* often occur in a series, their initial letters being combined to produce the occultist motto 'the whole is a secret' (*KLHSR* = *kullu-hu sirr*). Cf. ʿAllāma Ṭabāṭabāʾī's (d. 1981) definition of these five sciences in his *al-Mīzān* (1/244); significantly for our purposes here, in the same section he quotes: "Said our Shaykh al-Bahāʾī: 'The best book on these [five] arts is one I saw in the city of Herat titled *Kullu-hu Sirr*—a phrase derived from the first letter of each of these sciences' names: *al-kīmiyā*, *al-līmiyā*, *al-hīmiyā*, *al-sīmiyā* and *al-rīmiyā*.'"
117. See e.g., Ps.-Kāshifī, *Asrār-i Qāsimī*, 85–86, 87, 98, 99, 102, 105; Subtelny, "Kāshifī's *Asrār-i qāsimī*"; Lory, "Kashifi's *Asrār-i Qāsimī*," 537. Note that Lory's identification of Shaykh

Bahāʾ al-Dīn Muḥammad, i.e., Shaykh Bahāʾī, rather with Bahāʾ al-Dīn Naqshband is obviously incorrect.

118. Ps.-Kāshifī, *Asrār-i Qāsimī*, 85, 92, 97, 104. Other examples include Mīrzā Jān Kāshgharī (86), ʿAbd al-Laṭīf Gīlānī (90, 91, 97), Mīrzā Kāshānī (96) and ʿAbd al-Ṣamad Ardabīlī (114, 116).
119. Ibid., 89.
120. Ibid., 93, 101; for a translation of this passage see Subtelny, "Kāshifī's *Asrār-i qāsimī*."
121. Mullā Jalāl wrote both *Tuḥfat al-Munajjimīn* and *Khulāṣat al-Raml*, a manual of astrology and of geomancy respectively; see Melvin-Koushki, "Persianate Geomancy," 171.
122. This theme is pursued in Melvin-Koushki, *The Occult Science of Empire*.
123. Circulating in cheap bazaar editions and online, the subtitle of this miscellany proclaims 'Teach yourself the occult sciences and arts (*ʿulūm u funūn-i gharība*), including the subjugation, invocation and summoning of jinn, people and angels (*taskhīrāt u khutūmāt u iḥżārāt dar jinn u ins u muvakkal*); incantations for success and good fortune (*adʿiyāt-i* [sic] *kārgushāʾī u bakhtgushāʾī*), for seeking children, love, money, provision, the sale of goods, conquest and victory (*ṭalab-i farzand u maḥabbat u rizq u rūzī u furūsh-i matāʿ, fatḥ u pīrūzī*); and the countering of talismans and magic (*bāṭil nimūdan-i ṭilismāt u jādū*).' On this grimoire specifically see Doostdar, "Impossible Occultists," 176–78; on the popular vitality of occultist practices in modern Iran generally see idem, *The Iranian Metaphysicals*.
124. For a diagnosis of this historiographical ill and a proposed philological remedy, see Melvin-Koushki, "*How to Rule the World*." An exception is Michael Noble's recent groundbreaking study of Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī's (d. 1209) *Hidden Secret* (*al-Sirr al-maktūm*), *Philosophising the Occult*.
125. Melvin-Koushki, "*Taḥqīq* vs. *Taqlīd*."
126. Adding to this irony is the fact that now lionized—yet sanitized—Muslim reformists of the calibre of Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi (d. 1762) were committed occultists in their own right; see Morgan, "Spokesman of the Unseen World."
127. This theme is developed in Melvin-Koushki, "*How to Rule the World*."
128. Contrast here the many dozens of excellent studies and monographs devoted to Agrippa and his occult philosophy alone published over the last century and a half.

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